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THE WORKS OF
GEORGE MEREDITH

MEMORIAL EDITION

VOLUME

XIV



*View over the garden to Box Hill
from Flint Cottage.*

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE EGOIST

A COMEDY IN
NARRATIVE

VOL. II

Memorial
Edition

LONDON

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ILLUSTRATION

VIEW OVER THE GARDEN TO BOX HILL, FROM AN
UPPER WINDOW IN FLINT COTTAGE, IN WHICH
ROOM THE AUTHOR WROTE BEFORE THE BUILD-
ING OF THE CHALET *Frontispiece*

From a photograph by Frederick H. Evans taken in 1909.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FLIGHT IN WILD WEATHER

THE morning of Lucy Darleton's letter of reply to her friend Clara was fair before sunrise with luminous colours that are an omen to the husbandman. Clara had no weather-eye for the rich Eastern crimson, nor a quiet space within her for the beauty. She looked on it as her gate of promise, and it set her throbbing with a revived relief in radiant things which she once dreamed of to surround her life, but her accelerated pulses narrowed her thoughts upon the machinery of her project. She herself was metal, pointing all to her one aim when in motion. Nothing came amiss to it, everything was fuel; fibs, evasions, the serene battalions of white lies parallel on the march with dainty rogue falsehoods. She had delivered herself of many yesterday in her engagements for to-day. Pressure was put on her to engage herself, and she did so liberally, throwing the burden of deceitfulness on the extraordinary pressure. 'I want the early part of the morning; the rest of the day I shall be at liberty.' She said it to Willoughby, Miss Dale, Colonel De Craye, and only the third time was she aware of the delicious double meaning. Hence she associated it with the Colonel.

Your loudest outcry against the wretch who breaks your rules, is in asking how a tolerably conscientious person could have done this and the other besides the main offence, which you vow you could overlook but for the minor objections pertaining to conscience, the incomprehensible and abominable lies, for example, or the brazen coolness of the lying. Yet you know that we live in an

undisciplined world, where in our seasons of activity we are servants of our design, and that this comes of our passions, and those of our position. Our design shapes us for the work in hand, the passions man the ship, the position is their apology: and now should conscience be a passenger on board, a merely seeming swiftness of our vessel will keep him dumb as the unwilling guest of a pirate captain scudding from the cruiser half in cloven brine through rocks and shoals to save his black flag. Beware the false position.

That is easy to say: sometimes the tangle descends on us like a net of blight on a rose-bush. There is then an instant choice for us between courage to cut loose, and desperation if we do not. But not many men are trained to courage; young women are trained to cowardice. For them to front an evil with plain speech is to be guilty of effrontery and forfeit the waxen polish of purity, and therewith their commanding place in the market. They are trained to please man's taste, for which purpose they soon learn to live out of themselves, and look on themselves as he looks, almost as little disturbed as he by the undiscovered. Without courage, conscience is a sorry guest; and if all goes well with the pirate captain, conscience will be made to walk the plank for being of no service to either party.

Clara's fibs and evasions disturbed her not in the least that morning. She had chosen desperation, and she thought herself very brave because she was just brave enough to fly from her abhorrence. She was light-hearted, or more truly, drunken-hearted. Her quick nature realized the out of prison as vividly and suddenly as it had sunk suddenly and leadenly under the sense of imprisonment. Vernon crossed her mind: that was a friend! Yes, and there was a guide; but he would disapprove, and even he thwarting her way to sacred liberty must be thrust aside.

What would he think ? They might never meet, for her to know. Or one day in the Alps they might meet, a middle-aged couple, he famous, she regretful only to have fallen below his lofty standard. 'For, Mr. Whitford,' says she, very earnestly, 'I did wish at that time, believe me or not, to merit your approbation.' The brows of the phantom Vernon whom she conjured up were stern, as she had seen them yesterday in the library.

She gave herself a chiding for thinking of him when her mind should be intent on that which he was opposed to.

It was a livelier relaxation to think of young Crossjay's shamefaced confession presently, that he had been a lag-gard in bed while she swept the dews. She laughed at him, and immediately Crossjay popped out on her from behind a tree, causing her to clap hand to heart and stand fast. A conspirator is not of the stuff to bear surprises. He feared he had hurt her and was manly in his efforts to soothe : he had been up 'hours,' he said, and had watched her coming along the avenue, and did not mean to startle her : it was the kind of fun he played with fellows, and if he had hurt her, she might do anything to him she liked, and she would see if he could not stand to be punished. He was urgent with her to inflict corporal punishment on him.

'I shall leave it to the boatswain to do that when you're in the navy,' said Clara.

'The boatswain daren't strike an officer ! so now you see what you know of the navy,' said Crossjay.

'But you could not have been out before me, you naughty boy, for I found all the locks and bolts when I went to the door.'

'But you didn't go to the back-door, and Sir Willoughby's private door : you came out by the hall-door ; and I know what you want, Miss Middleton, you want not to pay what you've lost.'

‘ What have I lost, Crossjay ? ’

‘ Your wager.’

‘ What was that ? ’

‘ You know.’

‘ Speak.’

‘ A kiss.’

‘ Nothing of the sort. But, dear boy, I don’t love you less for not kissing you. All that is nonsense : you have to think only of learning, and to be truthful. ³ Never tell a story : suffer anything rather than be dishonest.’ She was particularly impressive upon the silliness and wickedness of falsehood, and added : ‘ Do you hear ? ’

‘ Yes : but you kissed me when I had been out in the rain that day.’

‘ Because I promised.’

‘ And Miss Middleton, you betted a kiss yesterday.’

‘ I am sure, Crossjay—no, I will not say I am sure : but can you say you are sure you were out first this morning ? Well, will you say you are sure that when you left the house you did not see me in the avenue ? You can’t : ah ! ’

‘ Miss Middleton, I do really believe I was dressed first.’

‘ Always be truthful, my dear boy, and then you may feel that Clara Middleton will always love you.’

‘ But, Miss Middleton, when you ’re married you won’t be Clara Middleton.’

‘ I certainly shall, Crossjay.’

‘ No, you won’t, because I ’m so fond of your name ! ’

She considered and said : ‘ You have warned me, Crossjay, and I shall not marry. I shall wait,’ she was going to say, ‘ for you,’ but turned the hesitation to a period. ‘ Is the village where I posted my letter the day before yesterday too far for you ? ’

Crossjay howled in contempt. 'Next to Clara my favourite's Lucy,' he said.

'I thought Clara came next to Nelson,' said she; 'and a long way off too, if you're not going to be a landlubber.'

'I'm not going to be a landlubber, Miss Middleton, you may be absolutely positive on your solemn word.'

'You're getting to talk like one a little now and then, Crossjay.'

'Then I won't talk at all.'

He stuck to his resolution for one whole minute.

Clara hoped that on this morning of a doubtful though imperative venture she had done some good.

They walked fast to cover the distance to the village post-office and back before the breakfast hour: and they had plenty of time, arriving too early for the opening of the door, so that Crossjay began to dance with an appetite, and was despatched to besiege a bakery. Clara felt lonely without him, apprehensively timid in the shuttered unmoving village street. She was glad of his return. When at last her letter was handed to her, on the testimony of the postman that she was the lawful applicant, Crossjay and she put on a sharp trot to be back at the Hall in good time. She took a swallowing glance of the first page of Lucy's writing:

'Telegraph, and I will meet you. I will supply you with everything you can want for the two nights, if you cannot stop longer.'

That was the gist of the letter. A second, less voracious, glance at it along the road brought sweetness:—Lucy wrote:

'Do I love you as I did? my best friend, you must fall into unhappiness to have the answer to that.'

Clara broke a silence.

'Yes, dear Crossjay, and if you like you shall have another walk with me after breakfast. But remember,

you must not say where you have gone with me. I shall give you twenty shillings to go and buy those birds' eggs and the butterflies you want for your collection ; and mind, promise me, to-day is your last day of truancy. Tell Mr. Whitford how ungrateful you know you have been, that he may have some hope of you. You know the way across the fields to the railway station ? '

' You save a mile ; you drop on the road by Comblin's mill, and then there 's another five-minutes' cut, and the rest 's road.'

' Then, Crossjay, immediately after breakfast run round behind the pheasantry, and there I 'll find you. And if any one comes to you before I come, say you are admiring the plumage of the Himalaya—the beautiful Indian bird ; and if we 're found together, we run a race, and of course you can catch me, but you mustn't until we 're out of sight. Tell Mr. Vernon at night—tell Mr. Whitford at night you had the money from me as part of my allowance to you for pocket-money. I used to like to have pocket-money, Crossjay. And you may tell him I gave you the holiday, and I may write to him for his excuse, if he is not too harsh to grant it. He can be very harsh.'

' You look right into his eyes next time, Miss Middleton. I used to think him awful, till he made me look at him. He says men ought to look straight at one another, just as we do when he gives me my boxing-lesson, and then we won't have quarrelling half so much. I can't recollect everything he says.'

' You are not bound to, Crossjay.'

' No, but you like to hear.'

' Really, dear boy, I can't accuse myself of having told you that.'

' No, but, Miss Middleton, you do. And he 's fond of your singing and playing on the piano, and watches you.'

‘ We shall be late if we don’t mind,’ said Clara, starting to a pace close on a run.

They were in time for a circuit in the park to the wild double cherry-blossom, no longer all white. Clara gazed up from under it, where she had imagined a fairer visible heavenliness than any other sight of earth had ever given her. That was when Vernon lay beneath. But she had certainly looked above, not at him. The tree seemed sorrowful in its withering flowers of the colour of trodden snow.

Crossjay resumed the conversation.

‘ He says ladies don’t like him much.’

‘ Who says that ? ’

‘ Mr. Whitford.’

‘ Were those his words ? ’

‘ I forget the words : but he said they wouldn’t be taught by him, like me ever since you came ; and since you came I ’ve liked him ten times more.’

‘ The more you like him the more I shall like you, Crossjay.’

The boy raised a shout and scampered away to Sir Willoughby, at the appearance of whom Clara felt herself nipped and curling inward. Crossjay ran up to him with every sign of pleasure. Yet he had not mentioned him during the walk ; and Clara took it for a sign that the boy understood the entire satisfaction Willoughby had in mere shows of affection, and acted up to it. Hardly blaming Crossjay, she was a critic of the scene, for the reason that youthful creatures who have ceased to love a person, hunger for evidence against him to confirm their hard animus, which will seem to them sometimes, when he is not immediately irritating them, brutish, because they cannot analyze it and reduce it to the multitude of just antagonisms whereof it came. It has passed by large accumulation into a sombre and speechless load upon the

senses, and fresh evidence, the smallest item, is a champion to speak for it. Being about to do wrong, she grasped at this eagerly, and brooded on the little of vital and truthful that there was in the man, and how he corrupted the boy. Nevertheless she instinctively imitated Crossjay in an almost sparkling salute to him.

‘ Good morning, Willoughby ; it was not a morning to lose : have you been out long ? ’

He retained her hand. ‘ My dear Clara ! and you, have you not over-fatigued yourself ? Where have you been ? ’

‘ Round—everywhere ! And I am certainly not tired. ’

‘ Only you and Crossjay ? You should have loosened the dogs. ’

‘ Their barking would have annoyed the house. ’

‘ Less than I am annoyed to think of you without protection. ’

He kissed her fingers : it was a loving speech.

‘ The household . . . ’ said Clara, but would not insist to convict him of what he could not have perceived.

‘ If you outstrip me another morning, Clara, promise me to take the dogs ; will you ? ’

‘ Yes. ’

‘ To-day I am altogether yours. ’

‘ Are you ? ’

‘ From the first to the last hour of it !—So you fall in with Horace’s humour pleasantly ? ’

‘ He is very amusing. ’

‘ As good as though one had hired him. ’

‘ Here comes Colonel De Craye. ’

‘ He must think we *have* hired him ! ’

She noticed the bitterness of Willoughby’s tone. He sang out a good morning to De Craye, and remarked that he must go to the stables.

‘ Darleton ? Darleton, Miss Middleton ? ’ said the colonel, rising from his bow to her : ‘ a daughter of

General Darleton ? If so, I have had the honour to dance with her. And have not you ?—practised with her, I mean ; or gone off in a triumph to dance it out as young ladies do ? So you know what a delightful partner she is.’

‘ She is ! ’ cried Clara, enthusiastic for her succouring friend, whose letter was the treasure in her bosom.

‘ Oddly, the name did not strike me yesterday, Miss Middleton. In the middle of the night it rang a little silver bell in my ear, and I remembered the lady I was half in love with, if only for her dancing. She is dark, of your height, as light on her feet ; a sister in another colour. Now that I know her to be your friend . . . ! ’

‘ Why, you may meet her, Colonel De Craye.’

‘ It ’ll be to offer her a castaway. And one only meets a charming girl to hear that she ’s engaged ! ’Tis not a line of a ballad, Miss Middleton, but out of the heart.’

‘ Lucy Darleton . . . You were leading me to talk seriously to you, Colonel De Craye.’

‘ Will you one day ?—and not think me a perpetual tumbler ! You have heard of melancholy clowns. You would find the face not so laughable behind my paint. When I was thirteen years younger I was loved, and my dearest sank to the grave. Since then I have not been quite at home in life ; probably because of finding no one so charitable as she. ’Tis easy to win smiles and hands, but not so easy to win a woman whose faith you would trust as your own heart before the enemy. I was poor then. She said : “ The day after my twenty-first birthday ” ; and that day I went for her, and I wondered they did not refuse me at the door. I was shown upstairs, and I saw her, and saw death. She wished to marry me, to leave me her fortune ! ’

‘ Then never marry,’ said Clara in an underbreath.

She glanced behind.

Sir Willoughby was close, walking on turf.

‘ I must be cunning to escape him after breakfast,’ she thought.

He had discarded his foolishness of the previous days, and the thought in him could have replied : ‘ I am a dolt if I let you out of my sight.’

Vernon appeared, formal as usual of late. Clara begged his excuse for withdrawing Crossjay from his morning swim. He nodded.

De Craye called to Willoughby for a book of the trains.

‘ There ’s a card in the smoking-room ; eleven, one, and four are the hours, if you must go,’ said Willoughby.

‘ You leave the Hall, Colonel De Craye ? ’

‘ In two or three days, Miss Middleton.’

She did not request him to stay : his announcement produced no effect on her. Consequently, thought he—well, what ? nothing : well, then, that she might not be minded to stay herself. Otherwise she would have regretted the loss of an amusing companion : that is the modest way of putting it. There is a modest and a vain for the same sentiment ; and both may be simultaneously in the same breast ; and each one as honest as the other ; so shy is man’s vanity in the presence of here and there a lady. She liked him : she did not care a pin for him—how could she ? yet she liked him : O to be able to do her some kindling bit of service ! These were his consecutive fancies, resolving naturally to the exclamation, and built on the conviction that she did not love Willoughby, and waited for a spirited lift from circumstances. His call for a book of the trains had been a sheer piece of impromptu, in the mind as well as on the mouth. It sprang, unknown to him, of conjectures he had indulged yesterday and the day before. This morning she would have an answer to her letter to her friend, Miss Lucy Darleton, the pretty dark girl, whom De Craye was astonished not to have noticed more when he danced with her. She, pretty as she was,

had come to his recollection through the name and rank of her father, a famous general of cavalry, and tactician in that arm. The colonel despised himself for not having been devoted to Clara Middleton's friend.

The morning's letters were on the bronze plate in the hall. Clara passed on her way to her room without inspecting them. De Craye opened an envelope and went upstairs to scribble a line. Sir Willoughby observed their absence at the solemn reading to the domestic servants in advance of breakfast. Three chairs were unoccupied. Vernon had his own notions of a mechanical service—and a precious profit he derived from them ! but the other two seats returned the stare Willoughby cast at their backs with an impudence that reminded him of his friend Horace's calling for a book of the trains, when a minute afterward he admitted he was going to stay at the Hall another two days, or three. The man possessed by jealousy is never in need of matter for it : he magnifies ; grass is jungle, hillocks are mountains. Willoughby's legs crossing and uncrossing audibly, and his tight-folded arms and clearing of the throat, were faint indications of his condition.

'Are you in fair health this morning, Willoughby ?' Dr. Middleton said to him after he had closed his volumes.

'The thing is not much questioned by those who know me intimately,' he replied.

'Willoughby unwell !' and : 'He is health incarnate !' exclaimed the ladies Eleanor and Isabel.

Lætitia grieved for him. Sunrays on a pest-stricken city, she thought, were like the smile of his face. She believed that he deeply loved Clara and had learnt more of her alienation.

He went into the hall to look up the well for the pair of malefactors ; on fire with what he could not reveal to a soul.

De Craye was in the housekeeper's room, talking to young Crossjay and Mrs. Montague just come up to breakfast. He had heard the boy chattering, and as the door was ajar, he peeped in, and was invited to enter. Mrs. Montague was very fond of hearing him talk ; he paid her the familiar respect which a lady of fallen fortunes, at a certain period after the fall, enjoys as a befittingly sad souvenir, and the respectfulness of the lord of the house was more chilling.

She bewailed the boy's trying his constitution with long walks before he had anything in him to walk on.

' And where did you go this morning, my lad ? ' said De Craye.

' Ah, you know the ground, colonel,' said Crossjay. ' I am hungry ! I shall eat three eggs and some bacon, and buttered cakes, and jam, then begin again, on my second cup of coffee.'

' It 's not braggadocio,' remarked Mrs. Montague. ' He waits empty from five in the morning till nine, and then he comes famished to my table, and eats too much.'

' Oh ! Mrs. Montague, that is what the country people call roemancing. For, Colonel De Craye, I had a bun at seven o'clock. Miss Middleton forced me to go and buy it.'

' A stale bun, my boy ? '

' Yesterday's : there wasn't much of a stopper to you in it, like a new bun.'

' And where did you leave Miss Middleton when you went to buy the bun ? You should never leave a lady ; and the street of a country town is lonely at that early hour. Crossjay, you surprise me.'

' She forced me to go, colonel. Indeed she did. What do I care for a bun ! And she was quite safe. We could hear the people stirring in the post-office, and I met our postman going for his letter-bag. I didn't want to go :

bother the bun !—but you can't disobey Miss Middleton. I never want to, and wouldn't.'

'There we're of the same mind,' said the colonel, and Crossjay shouted, for the lady whom they exalted was at the door.

'You will be too tired for a ride this morning,' De Craye said to her, descending the stairs.

She swung a bonnet by the ribands : 'I don't think of riding to-day.'

'Why did you not depute your mission to me ?'

'I like to bear my own burdens, as far as I can.'

'Miss Darleton is well ?'

'I presume so.'

'Will you try her recollection of me ?'

'It will probably be quite as lively as yours was.'

'Shall you see her soon ?'

'I hope so.'

Sir Willoughby met her at the foot of the stairs, but refrained from giving her a hand that shook.

'We shall have the day together,' he said.

Clara bowed.

At the breakfast-table she faced a clock.

De Craye took out his watch. 'You are five and a half minutes too slow by that clock, Willoughby.'

'The man omitted to come from Rendon to set it last week, Horace. He will find the hour too late here for him when he does come.'

One of the ladies compared the time of her watch with De Craye's, and Clara looked at hers and gratefully noted that she was four minutes in arrear.

She left the breakfast-room at a quarter to ten, after kissing her father. Willoughby was behind her. He had been soothed by thinking of his personal advantages over De Craye, and he felt assured that if he could be solitary with his eccentric bride and fold her in himself, he would,

cutting temper adrift, be the man he had been to her not so many days back. Considering how few days back, his temper was roused, but he controlled it.

They were slightly dissenting as De Craye stepped into the hall.

‘A present worth examining,’ Willoughby said to her : ‘And I do not dwell on the costliness. Come presently, then. I am at your disposal all day. I will drive you in the afternoon to call on Lady Busshe to offer your thanks : but you must see it first. It is laid out in the laboratory.’

‘There is time before the afternoon,’ said Clara.

‘Wedding presents ?’ interposed De Craye.

‘A porcelain service from Lady Busshe, Horace.’

‘Not in fragments ? Let me have a look at it. I’m haunted by an idea that porcelain always goes to pieces. I’ll have a look and take a hint. We’re in the laboratory, Miss Middleton.’

He put his arm under Willoughby’s. The resistance to him was momentary : Willoughby had the satisfaction of the thought that De Craye being with him was not with Clara ; and seeing her giving orders to her maid Barclay, he deferred his claim on her company for some short period.

De Craye detained him in the laboratory, first over the China cups and saucers, and then with the latest of London—tales of youngest Cupid upon subterranean adventures, having high titles to light him. Willoughby liked the tale thus illuminated, for without the title there was no special savour in such affairs, and it pulled down his betters in rank. He was of a morality to reprobate the erring dame while he enjoyed the incidents. He could not help interrupting De Craye to point at Vernon through the window, striding this way and that, evidently on the hunt for young Crossjay. ‘No one here knows how to manage the boy except myself. But go on, Horace,’ he said,

checking his contemptuous laugh ; and Vernon did look ridiculous, out there half-drenched already in a white rain, again shuffled off by the little rascal. It seemed that he was determined to have his runaway : he struck up the avenue at full pedestrian racing pace.

‘ A man looks a fool cutting after a cricket-ball ; but putting on steam in a storm of rain to catch a young villain out of sight, beats anything I ’ve witnessed,’ Willoughby resumed, in his amusement.

‘ Aiha ! ’ said De Craye, waving a hand to accompany the melodious accent, ‘ there are things to beat that for fun.’

He had smoked in the laboratory, so Willoughby directed a servant to transfer the porcelain service to one of the sitting-rooms for Clara’s inspection of it.

‘ You ’re a bold man,’ De Craye remarked. ‘ The luck may be with you, though. I wouldn’t handle the fragile treasure for a trifle.’

‘ I believe in my luck,’ said Willoughby.

Clara was now sought for. The lord of the house desired her presence impatiently, and had to wait. She was in none of the lower rooms. Barclay, her maid, upon interrogation, declared she was in none of the upper. Willoughby turned sharp on De Craye : he was there.

The ladies Eleanor and Isabel, and Miss Dale, were consulted. They had nothing to say about Clara’s movements, more than that they could not understand her exceeding restlessness. The idea of her being out of doors grew serious ; heaven was black, hard thunder rolled, and lightning flushed the battering rain. Men bearing umbrellas, shawls, and cloaks were despatched on a circuit of the park. De Craye said : ‘ I ’ll be one.’

‘ No,’ cried Willoughby, starting to intercept him, ‘ I can’t allow it.’

‘ I ’ve the scent of a hound, Willoughby ; I ’ll soon be on the track.’

‘ My dear Horace, I won’t let you go.’

‘ Adieu, dear boy ! and if the lady ’s discoverable, I ’m the one to find her.’

He stepped to the umbrella-stand. There was then a general question whether Clara had taken her umbrella. Barclay said she had. The fact indicated a wider stroll than round inside the park : Crossjay was likewise absent. De Craye nodded to himself.

Willoughby struck a rattling blow on the barometer.

‘ Where ’s Pollington ? ’ he called, and sent word for his man Pollington to bring big fishing-boots and waterproof wrappers.

An urgent debate within him was in progress.

Should he go forth alone on his chance of discovering Clara and forgiving her under his umbrella and cloak ? or should he prevent De Craye from going forth alone on the chance he vaunted so impudently ?

‘ You will offend me, Horace, if you insist,’ he said.

‘ Regard me as an instrument of destiny, Willoughby,’ replied De Craye.

‘ Then we go in company.’

‘ But that ’s an addition of one that cancels the other by conjunction, and ’s worse than simple division : for I can’t trust my wits unless I rely on them alone, you see.’

‘ Upon my word, you talk at times most unintelligible stuff, to be frank with you, Horace. Give it in English.’

‘ ’Tis not suited perhaps to the genius of the language, for I thought I talked English.’

‘ Oh ! there ’s English gibberish as well as Irish, we know ! ’

‘ And a deal foolisher when they do go at it ; for it won’t bear squeezing, we think, like Irish.’

‘ Where ! ’ exclaimed the ladies, ‘ where can she be ! The storm is terrible.’

Lætitia suggested the boathouse.

‘ For Crossjay hadn’t a swim this morning ! ’ said De Craye.

No one reflected on the absurdity that Clara should think of taking Crossjay for a swim in the lake, and immediately after his breakfast : it was accepted as a suggestion at least that she and Crossjay had gone to the lake for a row.

In the hopefulness of the idea, Willoughby suffered De Craye to go on his chance unaccompanied. He was near chuckling. He projected a plan for dismissing Crossjay and remaining in the boathouse with Clara, luxuriating in the prestige which would attach to him for seeking and finding her. Deadly sentiments intervened. Still he might expect to be alone with her where she could not slip from him.

The throwing open of the hall-doors for the gentlemen presented a framed picture of a deluge. All the young-leaved trees were steely black, without a gradation of green, drooping and pouring, and the song of rain had become an inveterate hiss.

The ladies beholding it exclaimed against Clara, even apostrophized her, so dark are trivial errors when circumstances frown. She must be mad to tempt such weather : she was very giddy ; she was never at rest. Clara ! Clara ! how could you be so wild ! Ought we not to tell Dr. Middleton ?

Lætitia induced them to spare him.

‘ Which way do you take ? ’ said Willoughby, rather fearful that his companion was not to be got rid of now.

‘ Any way,’ said De Craye. ‘ I chuck up my head like a halfpenny and go by the toss.’

This enraging nonsense drove off Willoughby. De Craye saw him cast a furtive eye at his heels to make sure he was not followed, and thought : ‘ Jove ! he may be fond of her. But he’s not on the track. She’s a

determined girl, if I 'm correct. She 's a girl of a hundred thousand. Girls like that make the right sort of wives for the right men. They 're the girls to make men think of marrying. To-morrow ! only give me the chance. They stick to you fast when they do stick.'

Then a thought of her flower-like drapery and face caused him fervently to hope she had escaped the storm.

Calling at the West park-lodge he heard that Miss Middleton had been seen passing through the gate with Master Crossjay ; but she had not been seen coming back. Mr. Vernon Whitford had passed through half an hour later.

' After his young man ! ' said the colonel.

The lodge-keeper's wife and daughter knew of Master Crossjay's pranks ; Mr. Whitford, they said, had made inquiries about him, and must have caught him and sent him home to change his dripping things ; for Master Crossjay had come back, and had declined shelter in the lodge ; he seemed to be crying ; he went away soaking over the wet grass, hanging his head. The opinion at the lodge was, that Master Crossjay was unhappy.

' He very properly received a wiggling from Mr. Whitford, I have no doubt,' said Colonel De Craye.

Mother and daughter supposed it to be the case, and considered Crossjay very wilful for not going straight home to the Hall to change his wet clothes ; he was drenched.

De Craye drew out his watch. The time was ten minutes past eleven. If the surmise he had distantly spied was correct, Miss Middleton would have been caught in the storm midway to her destination. By his guess at her character (knowledge of it, he would have said), he judged that no storm would daunt her on a predetermined expedition. He deduced in consequence that she was at the present moment flying to her friend the charming brunette Lucy Darleton.

Still, as there was a possibility of the rain having been too much for her, and as he had no other speculation concerning the route she had taken, he decided upon keeping along the road to Rendon, with a keen eye at cottage and farmhouse windows.

CHAPTER XXVI

VERNON IN PURSUIT

THE lodge-keeper had a son, who was a chum of Master Crossjay's, and errant-fellow with him upon many adventures ; for this boy's passion was to become a gamekeeper, and accompanied by one of the head-gamekeeper's youngsters, he and Crossjay were in the habit of ranging over the country, preparing for a profession delightful to the tastes of all three. Crossjay's prospective connection with the mysterious ocean bestowed the title of captain on him by common consent ; he led them, and when missing for lessons he was generally in the society of Jacob Croom or Jonathan Fernaway. Vernon made sure of Crossjay when he perceived Jacob Croom sitting on a stool in the little lodge-parlour. Jacob's appearance of a diligent perusal of a book he had presented to the lad, he took for a decent piece of trickery. It was with amazement that he heard from the mother and daughter, as well as Jacob, of Miss Middleton's going through the gate before ten o'clock with Crossjay beside her, the latter too hurried to spare a nod to Jacob. That she, of all on earth, should be encouraging Crossjay to truancy was incredible. Vernon had to fall back upon Greek and Latin aphoristic shots at the sex to believe it.

Rain was universal ; a thick robe of it swept from hill to hill ; thunder rumbled remote, and between the ruffled

roars the downpour pressed on the land with a great noise of eager gobbling, much like that of the swine's trough fresh filled, as though a vast assembly of the hungered had seated themselves clamorously and fallen to on meats and drinks in a silence, save of the chaps. A rapid walker poetically and humourously minded gathers multitudes of images on his way. And rain, the heaviest you can meet, is a lively companion when the resolute pacer scorns discomfort of wet clothes and squealing boots. South-western rain-clouds, too, are never long sullen : they enfold and will have the earth in a good strong glut of the kissing overflow ; then, as a hawk with feathers on his beak of the bird in his claw lifts head, they rise and take veiled feature in long climbing watery lines : at any moment they may break the veil and show soft upper cloud, show sun on it, show sky, green near the verge they spring from, of the green of grass in early dew ; or, along a travelling sweep that rolls asunder overhead, heaven's laughter of purest blue among titanic white shoulders : it may mean fair smiling for awhile, or be the lightest interlude ; but the watery lines, and the drifting, the chasing, the upsoaring, all in a shadowy fingering of form, and the animation of the leaves of the trees pointing them on, the bending of the tree-tops, the snapping of branches, and the hurrahings of the stubborn hedge at wrestle with the flaws, yielding but a leaf at most, and that on a fling, make a glory of contest and wildness without aid of colour to inflame the man who is at home in them from old association on road, heath and mountain. Let him be drenched, his heart will sing. And thou, trim cockney, that jeerest, consider thyself, to whom it may occur to be out in such a scene, and with what steps of a nervous dancing master it would be thine to play the hunted rat of the elements, for the preservation of the one imagined dry spot about thee, somewhere on thy luckless person ! The taking of rain

and sun alike befits men of our climate, and he who would have the secret of a strengthening intoxication must court the clouds of the South-west with a lover's blood.

Vernon's happy recklessness was dashed by fears for Miss Middleton. Apart from those fears, he had the pleasure of a gull wheeling among foam-streaks of the wave. He supposed the Swiss and Tyrol Alps to have hidden their heads from him for many a day to come, and the springing and chiming South-west was the next best thing. A milder rain descended ; the country expanded darkly defined underneath the moving curtain ; the clouds were as he liked to see them, scaling ; but their skirts dragged. Torrents were in store, for they coursed streamingly still and had not the higher lift, or eagle ascent, which he knew for one of the signs of fairness, nor had the hills any belt of mist-like vapour.

On a step of the stile leading to the short-cut to Rendon young Crossjay was espied. A man-tramp sat on the top bar.

'There you are ; what are you doing there ? Where's Miss Middleton ?' said Vernon. 'Now, take care before you open your mouth.'

Crossjay shut the mouth he had opened.

'The lady has gone away over to a station, sir,' said the tramp.

'You fool !' roared Crossjay, ready to fly at him.

'But ain't it, now, young gentleman ? Can you say it ain't ?'

'I gave you a shilling, you ass !'

'You give me that sum, young gentleman, to stop here and take care of you, and here I stopped.'

'Mr. Whitford !' Crossjay appealed to his master, and broke off in disgust : 'Take care of me ! As if anybody who knows me would think I wanted taking care of ! Why, what a beast you must be, you fellow !'

‘Just as you like, young gentleman. I chaunted you all I know, to keep up your downcast spirits. You did want comforting. You wanted it rarely. You cried like an infant.’

‘I let you “chaunt” as you call it, to keep you from swearing.’

‘And why did I swear, young gentleman? because I’ve got an itchy coat in the wet, and no shirt for a lining. And no breakfast to give me a stomach for this kind of weather. That’s what I’ve come to in this world! I’m a walking moral. No wonder I swear, when I don’t strike up a chaunt.’

‘But why are you sitting here, wet through, Crossjay? Be off home at once, and change, and get ready for me.’

‘Mr. Whitford, I promised, and I tossed this fellow a shilling not to go bothering Miss Middleton.’

‘The lady wouldn’t have none o’ the young gentleman, sir, and I offered to go pioneer for her to the station, behind her, at a respectful distance.’

‘As if!—you treacherous cur!’ Crossjay ground his teeth at the betrayer. ‘Well, Mr. Whitford, and I didn’t trust him, and I stuck to him, or he’d have been after her whining about his coat and stomach, and talking of his being a moral. He repeats that to everybody.’

‘She has gone to the station?’ said Vernon.

Not a word on that subject was to be won from Crossjay.

‘How long since?’ Vernon partly addressed Mr. Tramp.

The latter became seized with shivers as he supplied the information that it might be a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes. ‘But what’s time to me, sir! If I had reg’lar meals, I should carry a clock in my inside. I got the rheumatics instead.’

‘Way there!’ Vernon cried, and took the stile at a vault.

‘That’s what gentlemen can do, who sleeps in their beds warm,’ moaned the tramp. ‘They’ve no joints.’

Vernon handed him a half-crown piece, for he had been of use for once.

‘Mr. Whitford, let me come. If you tell me to come I may. Do let me come,’ Crossjay begged with great entreaty. ‘I shan’t see her for . . .’

‘Be off, quick!’ Vernon cut him short and pushed on.

The tramp and Crossjay were audible to him; Crossjay spurning the consolations of the professional sad man.

Vernon sprang across the fields, timing himself by his watch to reach Rendon station ten minutes before eleven, though without clearly questioning the nature of the resolution which precipitated him. Dropping to the road, he had better foothold than on the slippery field-path, and he ran. His principal hope was that Clara would have missed her way. Another pelting of rain agitated him on her behalf. Might she not as well be suffered to go?—and sit three hours and more in a railway-carriage with wet feet!

He clasped the visionary little feet to warm them on his breast.—But Willoughby’s obstinate fatuity deserved the blow!—But neither she nor her father deserved the scandal. But she was desperate. Could reasoning touch her? If not, what would? He knew of nothing. Yesterday he had spoken strongly to Willoughby, to plead with him to favour her departure and give her leisure to sound her mind, and he had left his cousin, convinced that Clara’s best measure was flight: a man so cunning in a pretended obtuseness backed by senseless pride, and in petty tricks that sprang of a grovelling tyranny, could only be taught by facts.

Her recent treatment of him, however, was very strange ; so strange that he might have known himself better if he had reflected on the bound with which it shot him to a hard suspicion. De Craye had prepared the world to hear that he was leaving the Hall. Were they in concert ? The idea struck at his heart colder than if her damp little feet had been there.

Vernon's full exoneration of her for making a confidant of himself, did not extend its leniency to the young lady's character when there was question of her doing the same with a second gentleman. He could suspect much : he could even expect to find De Craye at the station.

That idea drew him up in his run, to meditate on the part he should play ; and by drove little Dr. Corney on the way to Rendon, and hailed him, and gave his cheerless figure the nearest approach to an Irish hug in the form of a dry seat under an umbrella and waterproof covering.

‘ Though it is the worst I can do for you, if you decline to supplement it with a dose of hot brandy and water at the Dolphin,’ said he : ‘ and I ’ll see you take it, if you please. I ’m bound to ease a Rendon patient out of the world. Medicine ’s one of their superstitions, which they cling to the harder the more useless it gets. Pill and priest launch him happy between them.—“ And what ’s on your conscience, Pat ?—It ’s whether your blessing, your Riverence, would disagree with another drop.—Then, put the horse before the cart, my son, and you shall have the two in harmony, and God speed ye ! ”—Rendon station, did you say, Vernon ? You shall have my prescription at the Railway Arms, if you ’re hurried. You have the look. What is it ? Can I help ? ’

‘ No. And don't ask.’

‘ You ’re like the Irish Grenadier who had a bullet in a humiliating situation. Here ’s Rendon, and through it

we go with a spanking clatter. Here 's Dr. Corney's dog-cart posthaste again. For there 's no dying without him now, and Repentance is on the death-bed for not calling him in before ! Half a charge of humbug hurts no son of a gun, friend Vernon, if he 'd have his firing take effect. Be tender to 't in man or woman, particularly woman. So, by goes the meteoric doctor, and I 'll bring noses to window-panes, you 'll see, which reminds me of the sweetest young lady *I* ever saw, and the luckiest man. When is she off for her bridal trousseau ? And when are they spliced ? I 'll not call her perfection, for that 's a post, afraid to move. But she 's a dancing sprig of the tree next it. Poetry 's wanted to speak of her. I 'm Irish and inflammable, I suppose, but I never looked on a girl to make a man comprehend the entire holy meaning of the word rapturous, like that one. And away she goes ! We 'll not say another word. But you 're a Grecian, friend Vernon. Now, couldn't you think her just a whiff of an idea of a daughter of a peccadillo-Goddess ? '

' Deuce take you, Corney, drop me here ; I shall be late for the train,' said Vernon, laying hand on the doctor's arm to check him on the way to the station in view.

Dr. Corney had a Celtic intelligence for a meaning behind an illogical tongue. He drew up, observing : ' Two minutes' run won't hurt you.'

He slightly fancied he might have given offence, though he was well acquainted with Vernon and had a cordial grasp at the parting.

The truth must be told, that Vernon could not at the moment bear any more talk from an Irishman. Dr. Corney had succeeded in persuading him not to wonder at Clara Middleton's liking for Colonel De Craye.

CHAPTER XXVII

AT THE RAILWAY STATION

CLARA stood in the waiting-room contemplating the white rails of the rain-swept line. Her lips parted at the sight of Vernon.

‘ You have your ticket ? ’ said he.

She nodded, and breathed more freely ; the matter of fact question was reassuring.

‘ You are wet,’ he resumed ; and it could not be denied.

‘ A little. I do not feel it.’

‘ I must beg you to come to the inn hard by : half a dozen steps. We shall see your train signalled. Come.’

She thought him startlingly authoritative, but he had good sense to back him ; and depressed as she was by the dampness, she was disposed to yield to reason if he continued to respect her independence. So she submitted outwardly, resisted inwardly, on the watch to stop him from taking any decisive lead.

‘ Shall we be sure to see the signal, Mr. Whitford ? ’

‘ I ’ll provide for that.’

He spoke to the station-clerk, and conducted her across the road.

‘ You are quite alone, Miss Middleton ? ’

‘ I am : I have not brought my maid.’

‘ You must take off boots and stockings at once, and have them dried. I ’ll put you in the hands of the landlady.’

‘ But my train ! ’

‘ You have full fifteen minutes, besides fair chances of delay.’

He seemed reasonable, the reverse of hostile, in spite of

his commanding air, and that was not unpleasant in one friendly to her adventure. She controlled her alert mistrustfulness and passed from him to the landlady, for her feet were wet and cold, the skirts of her dress were soiled ; generally inspecting herself, she was an object to be shuddered at, and she was grateful to Vernon for his inattention to her appearance.

Vernon ordered Dr. Corney's dose, and was ushered upstairs to a room of portraits, where the publican's ancestors and family sat against the walls, flat on their canvas as weeds of the botanist's portfolio, although corpulency was pretty generally insisted on, and there were formidable battalions of bust among the females. All of them had the aspect of the national energy which has vanquished obstacles to subside on its ideal. They all gazed straight at the guest. ' Drink, and come to this ! ' they might have been labelled to say to him. He was in the private Walhalla of a large class of his countrymen. The existing host had taken forethought to be of the party in his prime, and in the central place, looking fresh-flattened there, and sanguine from the performance. By-and-by a son would shove him aside ; meanwhile he shelved his parent, according to the manners of energy.

One should not be a critic of our works of Art in uncomfortable garments. Vernon turned from the portraits to a stuffed pike in a glass-case, and plunged into sympathy with the fish for a refuge.

Clara soon rejoined him, saying : ' But you, you must be very wet. You are without an umbrella. You must be wet through, Mr. Whitford.'

' We're all wet through to-day,' said Vernon. ' Crossjay's wet through, and a tramp he met.'

' The horrid man ! But Crossjay should have turned back when I told him. Cannot the landlord assist you ? You are not tied to time. I begged Crossjay to turn back

when it began to rain : when it became heavy I compelled him. So you met my poor Crossjay ? ’

‘ You have not to blame him for betraying you. The tramp did that. I was thrown on your track quite by accident. Now pardon me for using authority : and don’t be alarmed, Miss Middleton ; you are perfectly free for me ; but you must not run a risk to your health. I met Dr. Corney coming along, and he prescribed hot brandy and water for a wet skin ; especially for sitting in it. There ’s the stuff on the table ; I see you have been aware of a singular odour ; you must consent to sip some, as medicine ; merely to give you warmth.’

‘ Impossible, Mr. Whitford : I could not taste it. But pray, obey Dr. Corney, if he ordered it for you.’

‘ I can’t unless you do.’

‘ I will, then : I will try.’

She held the glass, attempted, and was baffled by the reek of it.

‘ Try : you can do anything,’ said Vernon.

‘ Now that you find me here, Mr. Whitford ! Anything for myself, it would seem, and nothing to save a friend. But I will really try.’

‘ It must be a good mouthful.’

‘ I will try. And you will finish the glass ? ’

‘ With your permission, if you do not leave too much.’

They were to drink out of the same glass ; and she was to drink some of this infamous mixture : and she was in a kind of hotel alone with him : and he was drenched in running after her :—all this came of breaking loose for an hour !

‘ Oh ! what a misfortune that it should be such a day, Mr. Whitford.’

‘ Did you not choose the day ? ’

‘ Not the weather.’

‘ And the worst of it is, that Willoughby will come upon

Crossjay wet to the bone, and pump him and get nothing but shufflings, blank lies, and then find him out and chase him from the house.'

Clara drank immediately, and more than she intended. She held the glass as an enemy to be delivered from, gasping, uncertain of her breath.

'Never let me be asked to endure such a thing again!'

'You are unlikely to be running away from father and friends again.'

She panted still with the fiery liquid she had gulped: and she wondered that it should belie its reputation in not fortifying her, but rendering her painfully susceptible to his remarks.

'Mr. Whitford, I need not seek to know what you think of me.'

'What I think? I don't think at all; I wish to serve you, if I can.'

'Am I right in supposing you a little afraid of me? You should not be. I have deceived no one. I have opened my heart to you, and am not ashamed of having done so.'

'It is an excellent habit, they say.'

'It is not a habit with me.'

He was touched, and for that reason, in his dissatisfaction with himself, not unwilling to hurt. 'We take our turn, Miss Middleton. I'm no hero, and a bad conspirator, so I am not of much avail.'

'You have been reserved—but I am going, and I leave my character behind. You condemned me to the poison-bowl; you have not touched it yourself.'

'In vino veritas: if I do I shall be speaking my mind.'

'Then do, for the sake of mind and body.'

'It won't be complimentary.'

'You can be harsh. Only say everything.'

'Have we time?'

They looked at their watches.

‘Six minutes,’ Clara said.

Vernon’s had stopped, penetrated by his total drenching.

She reproached herself. He laughed to quiet her. ‘My dies solemnnes are sure to give me duckings ; I ’m used to them. As for the watch, it will remind me that it stopped when you went.’

She raised the glass to him. She was happier and hoped for some little harshness and kindness mixed that she might carry away to travel with and think over.

He turned the glass as she had given it, turned it round in putting it to his lips : a scarce perceptible manœuvre, but that she had given it expressly on one side.

It may be hoped that it was not done by design. Done even accidentally, without a taint of contrivance, it was an affliction to see, and coiled through her, causing her to shrink and redden.

Fugitives are subject to strange incidents ; they are not vessels lying safe in harbour. She shut her lips tight, as if they had been stung. The realizing sensitiveness of her quick nature accused them of a loss of bloom. And the man who made her smart like this was formal as a railway-official on a platform !

‘Now we are both pledged in the poison-bowl,’ said he. ‘And it has the taste of rank poison, I confess. But the doctor prescribed it, and at sea we must be sailors. Now, Miss Middleton, time presses : will you return with me ?’

‘No ! no !’

‘Where do you propose to go ?’

‘To London ; to a friend—Miss Darleton.’

‘What message is there for your father ?’

‘Say, I have left a letter for him in a letter to be delivered to you.’

‘To me. And what message for Willoughby ?’

‘My maid Barclay will hand him a letter at noon.’

‘You have sealed Crossjay’s fate.’

‘How?’

‘He is probably at this instant undergoing an interrogation. You may guess at his replies. The letter will expose him, and Willoughby does not pardon.’

‘I regret it. I cannot avoid it. Poor boy! My dear Crossjay! I did not think of how Willoughby might punish him. I was very thoughtless. Mr. Whitford, my pinmoney shall go for his education. Later, when I am a little older, I shall be able to support him.’

‘That’s an encumbrance; you should not tie yourself to drag it about. You are inalterable, of course, but circumstances are not, and as it happens, women are more subject to them than we are.’

‘But I will not be!’

‘Your command of them is shown at the present moment.’

‘Because I determine to be free?’

‘No: because you do the contrary; you don’t determine; you run away from the difficulty, and leave it to your father and friends to bear. As for Crossjay, you see you destroy one of his chances. I should have carried him off before this, if I had not thought it prudent to keep him on terms with Willoughby. We’ll let Crossjay stand aside. He’ll behave like a man of honour, imitating others who have had to do the same for ladies.’

‘Have spoken falsely to shelter cowards, you mean, Mr. Whitford. ‘Oh! I know.—I have but two minutes. The die is cast. I cannot go back. I must get ready. Will you see me to the station? I would rather you should hurry home.’

‘I will see the last of you. I will wait for you here. An express runs ahead of your train, and I have arranged with the clerk for a signal; I have an eye on the window.’

‘ You are still my best friend, Mr. Whitford.’

‘ Though—— ? ’

‘ Well, though you do not perfectly understand what torments have driven me to this.’

‘ Carried on tides and blown by winds ? ’

‘ Ah ! you do not understand.’

‘ Mysteries ? ’

‘ Sufferings are not mysteries, they are very simple facts.’

‘ Well, then, I don’t understand. But decide at once. I wish you to have your free will.’

She left the room.

Dry stockings and boots are better for travelling in than wet ones, but in spite of her direct resolve, she felt when drawing them on like one that has been tripped. The goal was desirable, the ardour was damped. Vernon’s wish that she should have her free will, compelled her to sound it : and it was of course to go, to be liberated, to cast off incubus :—and hurt her father ? injure Crossjay ? distress her friends ? No, and ten times no !

She returned to Vernon in haste, to shun the reflex of her mind.

He was looking at a closed carriage drawn up at the station-door.

‘ Shall we run over now, Mr. Whitford ? ’

‘ There ’s no signal. Here it ’s not so chilly.’

‘ I ventured to enclose my letter to papa in yours, trusting you would attend to my request to you to break the news to him gently and plead for me.’

‘ We will all do the utmost we can.’

‘ I am doomed to vex those who care for me. I tried to follow your counsel.’

‘ First you spoke to me, and then you spoke to Miss Dale ; and at least you have a clear conscience.’

‘ No.’

‘What burdens it?’

‘I have done nothing to burden it.’

‘Then it’s a clear conscience?’

‘No.’

Vernon’s shoulders jerked. Our patience with an innocent duplicity in women is measured by the place it assigns to us and another. If he had liked he could have thought: ‘You have not done but meditated something to trouble conscience.’ That was evident, and her speaking of it was proof too of the willingness to be clear. He would not help her. Man’s blood, which is the link with women and responsive to them on the instant for or against, obscured him. He shrugged anew when she said: ‘My character would have been degraded utterly by my staying there. Could you advise it?’

‘Certainly not the degradation of your character,’ he said, black on the subject of De Craye, and not lightened by feelings which made him sharply sensible of the beggarly dependent that he was, or poor adventuring scribbler that he was to become.

‘Why did you pursue me and wish to stop me, Mr. Whitford?’ said Clara, on the spur of a wound from his tone.

He replied: ‘I suppose I’m a busybody: I was never aware of it till now.’

‘You are my friend. Only you speak in irony so much. That was irony, about my clear conscience. I spoke to you and to Miss Dale: and then I rested and drifted. Can you not feel for me, that to mention it is like a scorching furnace? Willoughby has entangled papa. He schemes incessantly to keep me entangled. I fly from his cunning as much as from anything. I dread it. I have told you that I am more to blame than he, but I must accuse him. And wedding-presents! and congratulations! And to be his guest!’

‘ All that makes up a plea in mitigation,’ said Vernon.

‘ It is not sufficient for you ? ’ she asked him timidly.

‘ You have a masculine good sense that tells you you won’t be respected if you run. Three more days there might cover a retreat with your father.’

‘ He will not listen to me ! He confuses me ; Wiloughby has bewitched him.’

‘ Commission me : I will see that he listens.’

‘ And go back ? Oh ! no. To London ! Besides there is the dining with Mrs. Mountstuart this evening ; and I like her very well, but I must avoid her. She has a kind of idolatry . . . And what answers can I give ? I supplicate her with looks. She observes them, my efforts to divert them from being painful produce a comic expression to her, and I am a charming “rogue,” and I am entertained on the topic she assumes to be principally interesting me. I must avoid her. The thought of her leaves me no choice. She is clever. She could tattoo me with epigrams.’

‘ Stay : there you can hold your own.’

‘ She has told me you give me credit for a spice of wit. I have not discovered my possession. We have spoken of it ; we call it your delusion. She grants me some beauty ; that must be hers.’

‘ There ’s no delusion in one case or the other, Miss Middleton. You have beauty and wit : public opinion will say, wildness : indifference to your reputation, will be charged on you, and your friends will have to admit it. But you will be out of *this* difficulty.’

‘ Ah !—to weave a second ? ’

‘ Impossible to judge until we see how you escape the first.—And I have no more to say. I love your father. His humour of sententiousness and doctorial stilts is a mask he delights in, but you ought to know him and not be frightened by it. If you sat with him an hour at a

Latin task, and if you took his hand and told him you could not leave him, and no tears!—he would answer you at once. It would involve a day or two further : disagreeable to you, no doubt : preferable to the present mode of escape, as I think. But I have no power whatever to persuade. I have not the “ lady’s tongue.” My appeal is always to reason.’

‘ It is a compliment. I loathe the “ lady’s tongue.” ’

‘ It’s a distinctly good gift, and I wish I had it. I might have succeeded instead of failing, and appearing to pay a compliment.’

‘ Surely the express train is very late, Mr. Whitford ? ’

‘ The express has gone by.’

‘ Then we will cross over.’

‘ You would rather not be seen by Mrs. Mountstuart. That is her carriage drawn up at the station, and she is in it.’

Clara looked, and with the sinking of her heart said :

‘ I must brave her ! ’

‘ In that case, I will take my leave of you here, Miss Middleton.’

She gave him her hand. ‘ Why is Mrs. Mountstuart at the station to-day ? ’

‘ I suppose she has driven to meet one of the guests for her dinner-party. Professor Crooklyn was promised to your father, and he may be coming by the down-train.’

‘ Go back to the Hall ! ’ exclaimed Clara. ‘ How can I ? I have no more endurance left in me. If I had some support!—if it were the sense of secretly doing wrong, it might help me through. I am in a web. I cannot do right, whatever I do. There is only the thought of saving Crossjay. Yes, and sparing papa.—Good-bye, Mr. Whitford. I shall remember your kindness gratefully. I cannot go back.’

‘ You will not ? ’ said he, tempting her to hesitate.

‘No.’

‘But if you are seen by Mrs. Mountstuart, you must go back. I’ll do my best to take her away. Should she see you, you must patch up a story and apply to her for a lift. That, I think, is imperative.’

‘Not to my mind,’ said Clara.

He bowed hurriedly and withdrew. After her confession, peculiar to her, of possibly finding sustainment in secretly doing wrong, her flying or remaining seemed to him a choice of evils : and whilst she stood in bewildered speculation on his reason for pursuing her—which was not evident—he remembered the special fear inciting him, and so far did her justice as to have at himself on that subject. He had done something perhaps to save her from a cold : such was his only consolatory thought. He had also behaved like a man of honour, taking no personal advantage of her situation ; but to reflect on it recalled his astonishing dryness. The strict man of honour plays a part that he should not reflect on till about the fall of the curtain, otherwise he will be likely sometimes to feel the shiver of foolishness at his good conduct.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE RETURN

POSTED in observation at a corner of the window, Clara saw Vernon cross the road to Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson’s carriage, transformed to the leanest pattern of himself by narrowed shoulders and raised coat-collar. He had such an air of saying, ‘Tom’s a-cold,’ that her skin crept in sympathy.

Presently he left the carriage and went into the station :

a bell had rung. Was it her train? He approved her going, for he was employed in assisting her to go: a proceeding at variance with many things he had said, but he was as full of contradiction to-day as women are accused of being. The train came up. She trembled: no signal had appeared, and Vernon must have deceived her.

He returned; he entered the carriage, and the wheels were soon in motion. Immediately thereupon, Flitch's fly drove past, containing Colonel De Craye.

Vernon could not but have perceived him!

But what was it that had brought the colonel to this place? The pressure of Vernon's mind was on her and foiled her efforts to assert her perfect innocence, though she knew she had done nothing to allure the colonel hither. Excepting Willoughby, Colonel De Craye was the last person she would have wished to encounter.

She had now a dread of hearing the bell which would tell her that Vernon had not deceived her, and that she was out of his hands, in the hands of some one else.

She bit at her glove; she glanced at the concentrated eyes of the publican's family portraits, all looking as one; she noticed the empty tumbler, and went round to it and touched it, and the silly spoon in it.

A little yielding to desperation shoots us to strange distances!

Vernon had asked her whether she was alone. Connecting that inquiry, singular in itself, and singular in his manner of putting it, with the glass of burning liquid, she repeated: 'He must have seen Colonel De Craye!' and she stared at the empty glass, as at something that witnessed to something: for Vernon was not your supple cavalier assiduously on the smirk to pin a gallantry to commonplaces. But all the doors are not open in a young lady's consciousness, quick of nature though she may be:

some are locked and keyless, some will not open to the key, some are defended by ghosts inside. She could not have said what the something witnessed to. If we by chance know more, we have still no right to make it more prominent than it was with her. And the smell of the glass was odious ; it disgraced her. She had an impulse to pocket the spoon for a memento, to show it to grandchildren for a warning. Even the prelude to the morality to be uttered on the occasion sprang to her lips : ‘ Here, my dears, is a spoon you would be ashamed to use in your tea-cups, yet it was of more value to me at one period of my life than silver and gold in pointing out,’ etc. : the conclusion was hazy, like the conception ; she had her idea.

And in this mood she ran downstairs and met Colonel De Craye on the station steps.

The bright illumination of his face was that of the confident man confirmed in a risky guess in the crisis of doubt and dispute.

‘ Miss Middleton ! ’ his joyful surprise predominated : the pride of an accurate forecast, adding : ‘ I am not too late to be of service ? ’

She thanked him for the offer.

‘ Have you dismissed the fly, Colonel De Craye ? ’

‘ I have just been getting change to pay Mr. Flitch. He passed me on the road. He is interwound with our fates, to a certainty. I had only to jump in ; I knew it, and rolled along like a magician commanding a genie.’

‘ Have I been . . . ? ’

‘ Not seriously, nobody doubts your being under shelter. You will allow me to protect you ? My time is yours.’

‘ I was thinking of a running visit to my friend Miss Darleton.’

‘ May I venture ? I had the fancy that you wished to

see Miss Darleton to-day. You cannot make the journey unescorted.'

'Please retain the fly. Where is Willoughby?'

'He is in jack-boots. But may I not, Miss Middleton? I shall never be forgiven, if you refuse me.'

'There has been searching for me?'

'Some halloeing. But why am I rejected? Besides I don't require the fly; I shall walk if I am banished. Flitch is a wonderful conjuror, but the virtue is out of him for the next four and twenty hours. And it will be an opportunity to me to make my bow to Miss Darleton!'

'She is rigorous on the conventionalities, Colonel De Craye.'

'I'll appear before her as an ignoramus or a rebel, whichever she likes best to take in leading strings. I remember her. I was greatly struck by her.'

'Upon recollection!'

'Memory didn't happen to be handy at the first mention of the lady's name. As the general said of his ammunition and transport, there's the army!—but it was leagues in the rear. Like the footman who went to sleep after smelling fire in the house, I was thinking of other things. It will serve me right to be forgotten—if I am. I've a curiosity to know: a remainder of my coxcombry. Not that exactly: a wish to see the impression I made on your friend.—None at all? But any pebble casts a ripple.'

'That is hardly an impression,' said Clara, pacifying her irresoluteness with this light talk.

'The utmost to be hoped for by men like me! I have your permission?—one minute—I will get my ticket.'

'Do not,' said Clara.

'Your man-servant entreats you!'

She signified a decided negative with the head, but her

eyes were dreamy. She breathed deep : this thing done would cut the cord. Her sensation of languor swept over her.

De Craye took a stride. He was accosted by one of the railway-porters. Flitch's fly was in request for a gentleman. A portly old gentleman bothered about luggage appeared on the landing.

'The gentleman can have it,' said De Craye, handing Flitch his money.

'Open the door,' Clara said to Flitch.

He tugged at the handle with enthusiasm. The door was open : she stepped in.

'Then, mount the box and I'll jump up beside you,' De Craye called out, after the passion of regretful astonishment had melted from his features.

Clara directed him to the seat fronting her ; he protested indifference to the wet ; she kept the door unshut. His temper would have preferred to buffet the angry weather. The invitation was too sweet.

She heard now the bell of her own train. Driving beside the railway embankment she met the train : it was eighteen minutes late, by her watch. And why, when it flung up its whale-spouts of steam, she was not journeying in it she could not tell. She had acted of her free will : that she could say. Vernon had not induced her to remain ; assuredly her present companion had not ; and her whole heart was for flight : yet she was driving back to the Hall, not devoid of calmness. She speculated on the circumstance enough to think herself incomprehensible, and there left it, intent on the scene to come with Willoughby.

'I must choose a better day for London,' she remarked.

De Craye bowed, but did not remove his eyes from her.

'Miss Middleton, you do not trust me.'

She answered : ' Say in what way. It seems to me that I do.'

' I may speak ? '

' If it depends on my authority.'

' Fully ? '

' Whatever you have to say. Let me stipulate, be not very grave. I want cheering in wet weather.'

' Miss Middleton, Flitch is charioteer once more. Think of it. There's a tide that carries him perpetually to the place whence he was cast forth, and a thread that ties us to him in continuity. I have not the honour to be a friend of long standing : one ventures on one's devotion : it dates from the first moment of my seeing you. Flitch is to blame, if any one. Perhaps the spell would be broken, were he reinstated in his ancient office.'

' Perhaps it would,' said Clara, not with her best of smiles. Willoughby's pride of relentlessness appeared to her to be receiving a blow by rebound, and that seemed high justice.

' I am afraid you were right ; the poor fellow has no chance,' De Craye pursued. He paused, as for decorum in the presence of misfortune, and laughed sparkingly : ' Unless I engage him, or pretend to ! I verily believe that Flitch's melancholy person on the skirts of the Hall completes the picture of the Eden within.—Why will you not put some trust in me, Miss Middleton ? '

' But why should you not pretend to engage him, then, Colonel De Craye ? '

' We'll plot it, if you like. Can you trust me for that ? '

' For any act of disinterested kindness, I am sure.'

' You mean it ? '

' Without reserve. You could talk publicly of taking him to London.'

' Miss Middleton, just now you were going. My arrival

changed your mind. You distrust me : and ought I to wonder ? The wonder would be all the other way. You have not had the sort of report of me which would persuade you to confide, even in a case of extremity. I guessed you were going. Do you ask me, how ? I cannot say. Through what they call sympathy, and that 's inexplicable. There 's natural sympathy, natural antipathy. People have to live together to discover how deep it is ! '

Clara breathed her dumb admission of this truth.

The fly jolted and threatened to lurch.

' Flitch ! my dear man ! ' the colonel gave a murmuring remonstrance ; ' for,' said he to Clara, whom his apostrophe to Flitch had set smiling, ' we 're not safe with him, however we make believe, and he 'll be jerking the heart out of me before he has done.—But if two of us have not the misfortune to be united when they come to the discovery, there 's hope. That is, if one has courage, and the other has wisdom. Otherwise they may go to the yoke in spite of themselves. The great enemy is Pride, who has them both in a coach and drives them to the fatal door, and the only thing to do is to knock him off his box while there 's a minute to spare. And as there 's no pride like the pride of possession, the deadliest wound to him is to make that doubtful. Pride won't be taught wisdom in any other fashion. But one must have the courage to do it ! '

De Craye trifled with the window-sash, to give his words time to sink in solution.

Who but Willoughby stood for Pride ? And who, swayed by languor, had dreamed of a method that would be surest and swiftest to teach him the wisdom of surrendering her ?

' You know, Miss Middleton, I study character,' said the colonel.

‘ I see that you do,’ she answered.

‘ You intend to return ? ’

‘ Oh ! decidedly.’

‘ The day is unfavourable for travelling, I must say.’

‘ It is.’

‘ You may count on my discretion in the fullest degree. I throw myself on your generosity when I assure you that it was not my design to surprise a secret. I guessed the station, and went there, to put myself at your disposal.’

‘ Did you,’ said Clara, reddening slightly, ‘ chance to see Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson’s carriage pass you when you drove up to the station ? ’

De Craye had passed a carriage. ‘ I did not see the lady. She was in it ? ’

‘ Yes. And therefore it is better to put discretion on one side : we may be certain she saw you.’

‘ But not you, Miss Middleton ? ’

‘ I prefer to think that I am seen. I have a description of courage, Colonel De Craye, when it is forced on me.’

‘ I have not suspected the reverse. Courage wants training, as well as other fine capacities. Mine is often rusty and rheumatic.’

‘ I cannot hear of concealment or plotting.’

‘ Except, pray, to advance the cause of poor Flich ! ’

‘ He shall be excepted.’

The colonel screwed his head round for a glance at his coachman’s back.

‘ Perfectly guaranteed to-day ! ’ he said of Flich’s look of solidity. ‘ The convulsion of the elements appears to sober our friend ; he is only dangerous in calms. Five minutes will bring us to the park-gates.’

Clara leaned forward to gaze at the hedgeways in the neighbourhood of the Hall, strangely renewing their

familiarity with her. Both in thought and sensation she was like a flower beaten to earth, and she thanked her feminine mask for not showing how nerveless and languid she was. She could have accused Vernon of a treacherous cunning for imposing it on her free will to decide her fate.

Involuntarily she sighed.

'There is a train at three,' said De Craye, with splendid promptitude.

'Yes, and one at five. We dine with Mrs. Mountstuart to-night. And I have a passion for solitude! I think I was never intended for obligations. The moment I am bound I begin to brood on freedom.'

'Ladies who say that, Miss Middleton . . . !'

'What of them?'

'They're feeling too much alone.'

She could not combat the remark: by her self-assurance that she had the principle of faithfulness, she acknowledged to herself the truth of it:—there is no freedom for the weak! Vernon had said that once. She tried to resist the weight of it, and her sheer inability precipitated her into a sense of pitiful dependence.

Half an hour earlier it would have been a perilous condition to be traversing in the society of a closely-scanning reader of fair faces. Circumstances had changed. They were at the gates of the park.

'Shall I leave you?' said De Craye.

'Why should you?' she replied.

He bent to her gracefully.

The mild subservience flattered Clara's languor. He had not compelled her to be watchful on her guard, and she was unaware that he passed it when she acquiesced to his observation: 'An anticipatory story is a trap to the teller.'

'It is,' she said. She had been thinking as much.

He threw up his head to consult the brain comically with a dozen little blinks.

‘No, you are right, Miss Middleton, inventing beforehand never prospers ; ’tis a way to trip our own cleverness. Truth and mother-wit are the best counsellors : and as you are the former, I ’ll try to act up to the character you assign me.’

Some tangle, more prospective than present, seemed to be about her as she reflected. But her intention being to speak to Willoughby without subterfuge, she was grateful to her companion for not tempting her to swerve. No one could doubt his talent for elegant fibbing, and she was in the humour both to admire and adopt the art, so she was glad to be rescued from herself. How mother-wit was to second truth, she did not inquire, and as she did not happen to be thinking of Crossjay, she was not troubled by having to consider how truth and his tale of the morning would be likely to harmonize.

Driving down the park she had full occupation in questioning whether her return would be pleasing to Vernon, who was the virtual cause of it, though he had done so little to promote it : so little that she really doubted his pleasure in seeing her return.

CHAPTER XXIX

IN WHICH THE SENSITIVENESS OF SIR WILLOUGHBY IS
EXPLAINED : AND HE RECEIVES MUCH INSTRUCTION

THE Hall-clock over the stables was then striking twelve. It was the hour for her flight to be made known, and Clara sat in a turmoil of dim apprehension that prepared her nervous frame for a painful blush on her being asked by

Colonel De Craye whether she had set her watch correctly. He must, she understood, have seen through her at the breakfast-table : and was she not cruelly indebted to him for her evasion of Willoughby ? Such perspicacity of vision distressed and frightened her ; at the same time she was obliged to acknowledge that he had not presumed on it. Her dignity was in no way the worse for him. But it had been at a man's mercy, and there was the affliction.

She jumped from the fly as if she were leaving danger behind. She could at the moment have greeted Willoughby with a conventionally friendly smile. The doors were thrown open and young Crossjay flew out to her. He hung and danced on her hand, pressed the hand to his mouth, hardly believing that he saw and touched her, and in a lingo of dashes and asterisks related how Sir Willoughby had found him under the boathouse eaves and pumped him, and had been sent off to Hoppner's farm, where there was a sick child, and on along the road to a labourer's cottage : ' For I said you're so kind to poor people, Miss Middleton ; that's true, now that *is* true. And I said you wouldn't have me with you for fear of contagion ! ' This was what she had feared.

' Every crack and bang in a boy's vocabulary ? ' remarked the colonel, listening to him after he had paid Flitch.

The latter touched his hat till he had drawn attention to himself, when he exclaimed with rosy melancholy : ' Ah ! my lady, ah ! colonel, if ever I lives to drink some of the old port wine in the old Hall at Christmastide ! ' Their healths would on that occasion be drunk, it was implied. He threw up his eyes at the windows, humped his body and drove away.

' Then Mr. Whitford has not come back ? ' said Clara to Crossjay.

‘ No, Miss Middleton. Sir Willoughby has, and he’s upstairs in his room dressing.’

‘ Have you seen Barclay ? ’

‘ She has just gone into the laboratory. I told her Sir Willoughby wasn’t there.’

‘ Tell me, Crossjay, had she a letter ? ’

‘ She had something.’

‘ Run : say I am here ; I want the letter, it is mine.’

Crossjay sprang away and plunged into the arms of Sir Willoughby.

‘ One has to catch the fellow like a football,’ exclaimed the injured gentleman, doubled across the boy and holding him fast, that he might have an object to trifle with, to give himself countenance : he needed it. ‘ Clara, you have not been exposed to the weather ? ’

‘ Hardly at all.’

‘ I rejoice. You found shelter ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘ In one of the cottages ? ’

‘ Not in a cottage ; but I was perfectly sheltered. Colonel De Craye passed a fly before he met me . . . ’

‘ Flitch again ! ’ ejaculated the colonel.

‘ Yes, you have luck, you have luck,’ Willoughby addressed him, still clutching Crossjay and treating his tugs to get loose as an invitation to caresses. But the foil barely concealed his livid perturbation.

‘ Stay by me, sir,’ he said at last sharply to Crossjay, and Clara touched the boy’s shoulder in admonishment of him.

She turned to the colonel as they stepped into the hall : ‘ I have not thanked you, Colonel De Craye.’ She dropped her voice to its lowest : ‘ A letter in my hand-writing in the laboratory.’

Crossjay cried aloud with pain.

‘ I have you ! ’ Willoughby rallied him with a laugh not unlike the squeak of his victim.

‘ You squeeze awfully hard, sir ! ’

‘ Why, you milksop ! ’

‘ Am I ! But I want to get a book. ’

‘ Where is the book ? ’

‘ In the laboratory. ’

Colonel De Craye, sauntering by the laboratory door, sang out : ‘ I ’ll fetch you your book. What is it ? EARLY NAVIGATORS ? INFANT HYMNS ? I think my cigar-case is in here. ’

‘ Barclay speaks of a letter for me, ’ Willoughby said to Clara, ‘ marked to be delivered to me at noon ! ’

‘ In case of my not being back earlier : it was written to avert anxiety, ’ she replied.

‘ You are very good. ’

‘ Oh ! good ! Call me anything but good. Here are the ladies. Dear ladies ! ’ Clara swam to meet them as they issued from a morning-room into the hall, and interjections reigned for a couple of minutes.

Willoughby relinquished his grasp of Crossjay, who darted instantaneously at an angle to the laboratory, whither he followed, and he encountered De Craye coming out, but passed him in silence.

Crossjay was rangeing and peering all over the room. Willoughby went to his desk and the battery-table and the mantelpiece. He found no letter. Barclay had undoubtedly informed him that she had left a letter for him in the laboratory, by order of her mistress after breakfast.

He hurried out and ran upstairs in time to see De Craye and Barclay breaking a conference.

He beckoned to her. The maid lengthened her upper lip and beat her dress down smooth : signs of the apprehension of a crisis and of the getting ready for action.

‘ My mistress’s bell has just rung, Sir Willoughby. ’

‘ You had a letter for me.’

‘ I said . . .’

‘ You said when I met you at the foot of the stairs that you had left a letter for me in the laboratory.’

‘ It is lying on my mistress’s toilet-table.’

‘ Get it.’

Barclay swept round with another of her demure grimaces. It was apparently necessary with her that she should talk to herself in this public manner.

Willoughby waited for her ; but there was no reappearance of the maid.

Struck by the ridicule of his posture of expectation and of his whole behaviour, he went to his bedroom suite, shut himself in and paced the chambers, amazed at the creature he had become. Agitated like the commonest of wretches, destitute of self-control, not able to preserve a decent mask, he, accustomed to inflict these emotions and tremours upon others, was at once the puppet and dupe of an intriguing girl. His very stature seemed lessened. The glass did not say so, but the shrunken heart within him did, and wailfully too. Her compunction—‘ Call me anything but good ’—coming after her return to the Hall beside De Craye, and after the visible passage of a secret between them in his presence, was a confession : it blew at him with the fury of a furnace-blast in his face. Egoist agony wrung the outcry from him that dupery is a more blest condition. He desired to be deceived.

He could desire such a thing only in a temporary transport ; for above all he desired that no one should know of his being deceived : and were he a dupe the deceiver would know it, and her accomplice would know it, and the world would soon know of it : that world against whose tongue he stood defenceless. Within the shadow of his presence he compressed opinion, as a strong frost binds the springs of earth, but beyond it his shivering

sensitiveness ran about in dread of a stripping in a wintry atmosphere. This was the ground of his hatred of the world : it was an appalling fear on behalf of his naked eidolon, the tender infant Self swaddled in his name before the world, for which he felt as the most highly civilized of men alone can feel, and which it was impossible for him to stretch out hands to protect. There the poor little loveable creature ran for any mouth to blow on ; and frost-nipped and bruised, it cried to him, and he was of no avail ! Must we not detest a world that so treats us ? We loathe it the more, by the measure of our contempt for them, when we have made the people within the shadow-circle of our person slavish.

And he had been once a young Prince in popularity : the world had been his possession. Clara's treatment of him was a robbery of land and subjects. His grander dream had been a marriage with a lady of so glowing a fame for beauty and attachment to her lord that the world perforce must take her for witness to merits which would silence detraction and almost, not quite (it was undesirable), extinguish envy. But for the nature of women his dream would have been realized. He could not bring himself to denounce Fortune. It had cost him a grievous pang to tell Horace De Craye he was lucky ; he had been educated in the belief that Fortune specially prized and cherished little Willoughby : hence of necessity his maledictions fell upon women, or he would have forfeited the last blanket of a dream warm as poets revel in.

But if Clara deceived him, he inspired her with timidity. There was matter in that to make him wish to be deceived. She had not looked him much in the face : she had not crossed his eyes : she had looked deliberately downward, keeping her head up, to preserve an exterior pride. The attitude had its bewitchingness : the girl's physical pride of stature scorning to bend under a load of

conscious guilt, had a certain black-angel beauty for which he felt a hugging hatred : and according to his policy when these fits of amorous meditation seized him, he burst from the present one in the mood of his more favourable conception of Clara, and sought her out.

The quality of the mood of hugging hatred is, that if you are disallowed the hug, you do not hate the fiercer.

Contrariwise the prescription of a decorous distance of two feet ten inches, which is by measurement the delimitation exacted of a rightly respectful deportment, has this miraculous effect on the great creature man, or often it has : that his peculiar hatred returns to the reluctant admiration begetting it, and his passion for the hug falls prostrate as one of the Faithful before the shrine : he is reduced to worship by fasting.

(For these mysteries, consult the sublime chapter in the GREAT BOOK, the Seventy-First on LOVE, wherein Nothing is written, but the Reader receives a Lanthorn, a Powder-cask and a Pick-axe, and therewith pursues his yellow-dusking path across the rubble of preceding excavators in the solitary quarry : a yet more instructive passage than the over-scrawled Seventieth, or French Section, whence the chapter opens, and where hitherto the polite world has halted.)

The hurry of the hero is on us, we have no time to spare for mining-works : he hurried to catch her alone, to wreak his tortures on her in a bitter semblance of bodily worship, and satiated, then comfortably to spurn. He found her protected by Barclay on the stairs.

‘ That letter for me ? ’ he said.

‘ I think I told you, Willoughby, there was a letter I left with Barclay to reassure you in case of my not returning early,’ said Clara. ‘ It was unnecessary for her to deliver it ’

‘ Indeed ? But any letter, any writing, of yours, and from you to me ! You have it still ? ’

‘ No, I have destroyed it. ’

‘ That was wrong. ’

‘ It could not have given you pleasure. ’

‘ My dear Clara, one line from you ! ’

‘ There were but three. ’

Barclay stood sucking her lips. A maid in the secrets of her mistress is a purchaseable maid, for if she will take a bribe with her right hand she will with her left ; all that has to be calculated is the nature and amount of the bribe : such was the speculation indulged by Sir Willoughby, and he shrank from the thought and declined to know more than that he was on a volcanic hillside where a thin crust quaked over lava. This was a new condition with him, representing Clara’s gain in their combat. Clara did not fear his questioning so much as he feared her candour.

Mutually timid, they were of course formally polite, and no plain-speaking could have told one another more distinctly that each was defensive. Clara stood pledged to the fib ; packed, sealed and posted ; and he had only to ask to have it, supposing that he asked with a voice not exactly peremptory.

She said in her heart : ‘ It is your fault : you are relentless, and you would ruin Crossjay to punish him for devoting himself to me, like the poor thoughtless boy he is ! and so I am bound in honour to do my utmost for him. ’

The reciprocal devotedness moreover served two purposes : it preserved her from brooding on the humiliation of her lame flight and flutter back, and it quieted her mind in regard to the precipitate intimacy of her relations with Colonel De Craye. Willoughby’s boast of his implacable character was to blame. She was at war with him, and she was compelled to put the case in that light. Crossjay

must be shielded from one who could not spare an offender, so Colonel De Craye quite naturally was called on for his help, and the colonel's dexterous aid appeared to her more admirable than alarming.

Nevertheless she would not have answered a direct question falsely. She was for the fib, but not the lie ; at a word she could be disdainful of subterfuges. Her look said that. Willoughby perceived it. She had written him a letter of three lines : ' There were but three ' : and she had destroyed the letter. Something perchance was repented by her ? Then she had done him an injury ! Between his wrath at the suspicion of an injury, and the prudence enjoined by his abject coveting of her, he consented to be fooled for the sake of vengeance, and something besides.

' Well ! here you are, safe : I have you ! ' said he, with courtly exultation : ' and that is better than your handwriting. I have been all over the country after you.'

' Why did you ? We are not in a barbarous land,' said Clara.

' Crossjay talks of your visiting a sick child, my love : —you have changed your dress ? '

' You see.'

' The boy declared you were going to that farm of Hoppner's and some cottage. I met at my gates a tramping vagabond who swore to seeing you and the boy in a totally contrary direction.'

' Did you give him money ? '

' I fancy so.'

' Then he was paid for having seen me.'

Willoughby tossed his head : it might be as she suggested ; beggars are liars.

' But who sheltered you, my dear Clara ? You had not been heard of at Hoppner's.'

' The people have been indemnified for their pains.

To pay them more would be to spoil them. You disperse money too liberally. There was no fever in the place. Who could have anticipated such a downpour ! I want to consult Miss Dale on the important theme of a dress I think of wearing at Mrs. Mountstuart's to-night.'

'Do. She is unerring.'

'She has excellent taste.'

'She dresses very simply herself.'

'But it becomes her. She is one of the few women whom I feel I could not improve with a touch.'

'She has judgement.'

He reflected and repeated his encomium.

The shadow of a dimple in Clara's cheek awakened him to the idea that she had struck him somewhere : and certainly he would never again be able to put up the fiction of her jealousy of Lætitia. What, then, could be this girl's motive for praying to be released ? The interrogation humbled him : he fled from the answer.

Willoughby went in search of De Craye. That sprightly intriguer had no intention to let himself be caught solus. He was undiscoverable until the assembly sounded, when Clara dropped a public word or two, and he spoke in perfect harmony with her. After that, he gave his company to Willoughby for an hour at billiards, and was well beaten.

The announcement of a visit of Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson took the gentlemen to the drawing-room, rather suspecting that something stood in the way of her dinner-party. As it happened, she was lamenting only the loss of one of the jewels of the party : to wit, the great Professor Crooklyn, invited to meet Dr. Middleton at her table ; and she related how she had driven to the station by appointment, the professor being notoriously a bother-headed traveller : as was shown by the fact that he had missed his train in town, for he had not arrived ; nothing

had been seen of him. She cited Vernon Whitford for her authority that the train had been inspected and the platform scoured to find the professor.

'And so,' said she, 'I drove home your Green Man to dry him; he was wet through and chattering; the man was exactly like a skeleton wrapped in a sponge, and if he escapes a cold he must be as invulnerable as he boasts himself. These athletes are terrible boasters.'

'They climb their Alps to crow,' said Clara, excited by her apprehension that Mrs. Mountstuart would speak of having seen the colonel near the station.

There was a laugh, and Colonel De Craye laughed loudly as it flashed through him that a quick-witted impressionable girl like Miss Middleton must, before his arrival at the Hall, have speculated on such obdurate clay as Vernon Whitford was, with humourous despair at his uselessness to her. Glancing round, he saw Vernon standing fixed in a stare at the young lady.

'You heard that, Whitford?' he said, and Clara's face betokening an extremer contrition than he thought was demanded, the colonel rallied the Alpine climber for striving to be the tallest of them—Signor Excelsior!—and described these conquerors of mountains pancaked on the rocks in desperate embraces, bleached here, burnt there, barked all over, all to be able to say they had been up 'so high'—had conquered another mountain! He was extravagantly funny and self-satisfied: a conqueror of the sex having such different rewards of enterprise.

Vernon recovered in time to accept the absurdities heaped on him.

'Climbing peaks won't compare with hunting a wriggler,' said he.

His allusion to the incessant pursuit of young Crossjay to pin him to lessons was appreciated.

Clara felt the thread of the look he cast from herself to

Colonel De Craye. She was helpless, if he chose to misjudge her. Colonel De Craye did not !

Crossjay had the misfortune to enter the drawing-room while Mrs. Mountstuart was compassionating Vernon for his ducking in pursuit of the wriggler ; which De Craye likened to ' going through the river after his eel ' : and immediately there was a cross-questioning of the boy between De Craye and Willoughby on the subject of his latest truancy, each gentleman trying to run him down in a palpable fib. They were succeeding brilliantly when Vernon put a stop to it by marching him off to hard labour. Mrs. Mountstuart was led away to inspect the beautiful porcelain service, the present of Lady Busshe. ' Porcelain again ! ' she said to Willoughby, and would have signalled to the ' dainty rogue ' to come with them, had not Clara been leaning over to Lætitia, talking to her in an attitude too graceful to be disturbed. She called his attention to it, slightly wondering at his impatience. She departed to meet an afternoon train on the chance that it would land the professor. ' But tell Dr. Middleton,' said she, ' I fear I shall have no one worthy of him ! And,' she added to Willoughby, as she walked out to her carriage, ' I shall expect you to do the great-gunnery talk at table.'

' Miss Dale keeps it up with him best,' said Willoughby.

' She does everything best ! But my dinner-table is involved, and I cannot count on a young woman to talk across it. I would hire a lion of a menagerie, if one were handy, rather than have a famous scholar at my table unsupported by another famous scholar. Dr. Middleton would ride down a duke when the wine is in him. He will terrify my poor flock. The truth is, we can't leaven him : I foresee undigested lumps of conversation, unless you devote yourself.'

' I will devote myself,' said Willoughby.

' I can calculate on Colonel De Craye and our porcelain

beauty for any quantity of sparkles, if you promise that. They play well together. You are not to be one of the Gods to-night, but a kind of Jupiter's cupbearer ;—Juno's, if you like : and Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer, and all your admirers shall know subsequently what you have done. You see my alarm. I certainly did not rank Professor Crooklyn among the possibly faithless, or I never would have ventured on Dr. Middleton at my table. My dinner-parties have hitherto been all successes. Naturally I feel the greater anxiety about this one. For a single failure is all the more conspicuous. The exception is everlastingly cited ! It is not so much what people say, but my own sentiments. I hate to fail. However, if you are true, we may do.'

'Whenever the great gun goes off I will fall on my face, madam !'

'Something of that sort,' said the dame, smiling, and leaving him to reflect on the egoism of women. For the sake of her dinner-party he was to be a cipher in attendance on Dr. Middleton, and Clara and De Craye were to be encouraged in sparkling together ! And it happened that he particularly wished to shine. The admiration of his county made him believe he had a flavour in general society that was not yet distinguished by his bride, and he was to relinquish his opportunity in order to please Mrs. Mountstuart ! Had she been in the pay of his rival she could not have stipulated for more.

He remembered young Crossjay's instant quietude, after struggling in his grasp, when Clara laid her hand on the boy : and from that infinitesimal circumstance he deduced the boy's perception of a differing between himself and his bride, and a transfer of Crossjay's allegiance from him to her. She shone ; she had the gift of female beauty ; the boy was attracted to it. That boy must be made to feel his treason. But the point of the cogitation was, that

similarly were Clara to see her affianced shining, as shine he could when lit up by admirers, there was the probability that the sensation of her littleness would animate her to take aim at him once more. And then was the time for her chastisement.

A visit to Dr. Middleton in the library satisfied him that she had not been renewing her entreaties to leave Patterne. No, the miserable coquette had now her pastime and was content to stay. Deceit was in the air : he heard the sound of the shuttle of deceit without seeing it ; but on the whole, mindful of what he had dreaded during the hours of her absence, he was rather flattered, witheringly flattered. What was it that he had dreaded ? Nothing less than news of her running away. Indeed a silly fancy, a lover's fancy ! yet it had led him so far as to suspect, after parting with De Craye in the rain, that his friend and his bride were in collusion, and that he should not see them again. He had actually shouted on the rainy road the theatric call ' Fooled ! ' one of the stage-cries which are cries of nature ! particularly the cry of nature with men who have driven other men to the cry.

Constantia Durham had taught him to believe women capable of explosions of treason at half a minute's notice. And strangely, to prove that women are all of a pack, she had worn exactly the same placidity of countenance just before she fled, as Clara yesterday and to-day ; no nervousness, no flushes, no twitches of the brows, but smoothness, ease of manner—an elegant sisterliness, one might almost say : as if the creature had found a midway and border-line to walk on between cruelty and kindness, and between repulsion and attraction ; so that up to the verge of her breath she did forcefully attract, repelling at one foot's length with her armour of chill serenity. Not with any disdain, with no passion : such a line as she herself pursued she indicated to him on a neighbouring

parallel. The passion in her was like a place of waves evaporated to a crust of salt. Clara's resemblance to Constantia in this instance was ominous. For him whose tragic privilege it had been to fold each of them in his arms, and weigh on their eyelids, and see the dissolving mist-deeps in their eyes, it was horrible. Once more the comparison overcame him. Constantia he could condemn for revealing too much to his manly sight : she had met him almost half way : well, that was complimentary and sanguine : but her frankness was a baldness often rendering it doubtful which of the two, lady or gentleman, was the object of the chase—an extreme perplexity to his manly soul. Now Clara's inner spirit was shyer, shy as a doe down those rose-tinged abysses ; she allured both the lover and the hunter ; forests of heavenliness were in her flitting eyes. Here the difference of these fair women made his present fate an intolerable anguish. For if Constantia was like certain of the ladies whom he had rendered unhappy, triumphed over, as it is queerly called, Clara was not. Her individuality as a woman was a thing he had to bow to. It was impossible to roll her up in the sex and bestow a kick on the travelling bundle. Hence he loved her, though she hurt him. Hence his wretchedness, and but for the hearty sincerity of his faith in the Self he loved likewise and more, he would have been hangdog abject.

As for De Craye, Willoughby recollected his own exploits too proudly to put his trust in a man. That fatal conjunction of temper and policy had utterly thrown him off his guard, or he would not have trusted the fellow even in the first hour of his acquaintance with Clara. But he had wished her to be amused while he wove his plans to retain her at the Hall :—partly imagining that she would weary of his neglect : vile delusion ! In truth he should have given festivities, he should have been the sun

of a circle, and have revealed himself to her in his more dazzling form. He went near to calling himself foolish after the tremendous reverberation of 'Fooled!' had ceased to shake him.

How behave? It slapped the poor gentleman's pride in the face to ask. A private talk with her would rouse her to renew her supplications. He saw them flickering behind the girl's transparent calmness. That calmness really drew its dead ivory hue from the suppression of them: something as much he guessed; and he was not sure either of his temper or his policy if he should hear her repeat her profane request.

An impulse to address himself to Vernon and discourse with him jocularly on the childish whim of a young lady, moved perhaps by some whiff of jealousy, to shun the yoke, was checked. He had always taken so superior a pose with Vernon that he could not abandon it for a moment: on such a subject too! Besides Vernon was one of your men who entertain the ideas about women of fellows that have never conquered one: or only one, we will say in his case, knowing his secret history; and that one no flag to boast of. Densely ignorant of the sex, his nincompoopish idealizations, at other times preposterous, would now be annoying. He would probably presume on Clara's inconceivable lapse of dignity to read his master a lecture: he was quite equal to a philippic upon woman's rights. This man had not been afraid to say that he talked common sense to women. He was an example of the consequence!

Another result was, that Vernon did not talk sense to men. Willoughby's wrath at Clara's exposure of him to his cousin dismissed the proposal of a colloquy so likely to sting his temper, and so certain to diminish his loftiness. Unwilling to speak to anybody, he was isolated, yet consciously begirt by the mysterious action going on

all over the house, from Clara and De Craye to Lætitia and young Crossjay, down to Barclay the maid. His blind sensitiveness felt as we may suppose a spider to feel when plucked from his own web and set in the centre of another's. Lætitia looked her share in the mystery. A burden was on her eyelashes. How she could have come to any suspicion of the circumstances, he was unable to imagine. Her intense personal sympathy, it might be : he thought so with some gentle pity for her—of the paternal pat-back order of pity. She adored him, by decree of Venus ; and the Goddess had not decreed that he should find consolation in adoring her. Nor could the temptings of prudent counsel in his head induce him to run the risk of such a total turnover as the incurring of Lætitia's pity of himself by confiding in her. He checked that impulse also, and more sovereignly. For him to be pitied by Lætitia seemed an upsetting of the scheme of Providence. Providence, otherwise the discriminating dispensation of the good things of life, had made him the beacon, her the bird : she was really the last person to whom he could unbosom. The idea of his being in a position that suggested his doing so, thrilled him with fits of rage ; and it appalled him. There appeared to be another Power. The same which had humiliated him once was menacing him anew. For it could not be Providence, whose favourite he had ever been. We must have a couple of Powers to account for discomfort when Egoism is the kernel of our religion. Benevolence had singled him for uncommon benefits : malignancy was at work to rob him of them. And you think well of the world, do you !

Of necessity he associated Clara with the darker Power pointing the knife at the quick of his pride. Still, he would have raised her weeping : he would have stanchèd her wounds bleeding : he had an infinite thirst for her misery, that he might ease his heart of its charitable love.

Or let her commit herself, and be cast off ! Only she must commit herself glaringly, and be cast off by the world as well. Contemplating her in the form of a discarded weed, he had a catch of the breath : she was fair. He implored his Power that Horace De Craye might not be the man ! Why any man ? An illness, fever, fire, runaway horses, personal disfigurement, a laming, were sufficient. And then a formal and noble offer on his part to keep to the engagement with the unhappy wreck : yes, and to lead the limping thing to the altar, if she insisted. His imagination conceived it, and the world's applause besides.

Nausea, together with a sense of duty to his line, extinguished that loathsome prospect of a mate, though without obscuring his chivalrous devotion to his gentleman's word of honour, which remained in his mind to compliment him permanently.

On the whole, he could reasonably hope to subdue her to admiration. He drank a glass of champagne at his dressing ; an unaccustomed act, but, as he remarked casually to his man Pollington, for whom the rest of the bottle was left, he had taken no horse-exercise that day.

Having to speak to Vernon on business, he went to the schoolroom, where he discovered Clara, beautiful in full evening attire, with her arm on young Crossjay's shoulder, and heard that the hard taskmaker had abjured Mrs. Mountstuart's party, and had already excused himself, intending to keep Crossjay to the grindstone. Willoughby was for the boy, as usual, and more sparkingly than usual. Clara looked at him in some surprise. He rallied Vernon with great zest, quite silencing him when he said : ' I bear witness that the fellow was here at his regular hour for lessons, and were you ? ' He laid his hand on Crossjay, touching Clara's hand.

' You will remember what I told you, Crossjay,' said she, rising from the seat gracefully. ' It is my command.'

Crossjay frowned and puffed.

‘ But only if I ’m questioned,’ he said.

‘ Certainly,’ she replied.

‘ Then I question the rascal,’ said Willoughby, causing a start. ‘ What, sir, is your opinion of Miss Middleton in her robe of state this evening ? ’

‘ Now, the truth, Crossjay ! ’ Clara held up a finger ; and the boy could see she was playing at archness, but for Willoughby it was earnest. ‘ The truth is not likely to offend you or me either,’ he murmured to her.

‘ I wish him never, never, on any excuse, to speak anything else.’

‘ I always did think her a Beauty,’ Crossjay growled. He hated the having to say it.

‘ There ! ’ exclaimed Sir Willoughby, and bent extending an arm to her. ‘ You have not suffered from the truth, my Clara ! ’

Her answer was : ‘ I was thinking how he might suffer if he were taught to tell the reverse.’

‘ Oh ! for a fair lady ! ’

‘ That is the worst of teaching, Willoughby.’

‘ We ’ll leave it to the fellow’s instinct ; he has our blood in him. I could convince you, though, if I might cite circumstances. Yes ! But yes ! And yes again ! The entire truth cannot invariably be told. I venture to say it should not.’

‘ You would pardon it for the “ fair lady ” ? ’

‘ Applaud, my love.’

He squeezed the hand within his arm, contemplating her.

She was arrayed in a voluminous robe of pale blue silk vapourous with trimmings of light gauze of the same hue, gaze de Chambéry, matching her fair hair and clear skin for the complete overthrow of less inflammable men than Willoughby.

‘ Clara ! ’ sighed he.

‘ If so, it would really be generous,’ she said, ‘ though the teaching is bad.’

‘ I fancy I can be generous.’

‘ Do we ever know ? ’

He turned his head to Vernon, issuing brief succinct instructions for letters to be written, and drew her into the hall, saying : ‘ Know ? There are people who do *not* know themselves, and as they are the majority they manufacture the axioms. And it is assumed that we have to swallow them. I may observe that I think I know. I decline to be engulfed in those majorities. “ Among them, but not of them.” I know this, that my aim in life is to be generous.’

‘ Is it not an impulse or disposition rather than an aim ? ’

‘ So much I know,’ pursued Willoughby, refusing to be tripped. But she rang discordantly in his ear. His ‘ fancy that he could be generous,’ and his ‘ aim at being generous,’ had met with no response. ‘ I have given proofs,’ he said briefly, to drop a subject upon which he was not permitted to dilate ; and he murmured : ‘ People acquainted with me . . . ! ’ She was asked if she expected him to boast of generous deeds. ‘ From childhood ! ’ she heard him mutter ; and she said to herself : ‘ Release me, and you shall be everything ! ’

The unhappy gentleman ached as he talked : for with men and with hosts of women to whom he was indifferent, never did he converse in this shambling, third-rate, sheepish manner, devoid of all highness of tone and the proper precision of an authority. He was unable to fathom the cause of it, but Clara imposed it on him, and only in anger could he throw it off. The temptation to an outburst that would flatter him with the sound of his authoritative voice had to be resisted on a night when he

must be composed if he intended to shine, so he merely mentioned Lady Busshe's present, to gratify spleen by preparing the ground for dissension, and prudently acquiesced in her anticipated slipperiness. She would rather not look at it now, she said.

'Not now ; very well,' said he.

His immediate deference made her regretful. 'There is hardly time, Willoughby.'

'My dear, we shall have to express our thanks to her.'

'I cannot.'

His arm contracted sharply. He was obliged to be silent.

Dr. Middleton, Lætitia and the ladies Eleanor and Isabel joining them in the hall found two figures linked together in a shadowy indication of halves that have fallen apart and hang on the last thread of junction. Willoughby retained her hand on his arm ; he held to it as the symbol of their alliance, and oppressed the girl's nerves by contact with a frame labouring for breath. De Craye looked on them from overhead. The carriages were at the door, and Willoughby said : 'Where 's Horace ? I suppose he 's taking a final shot at his Book of Anecdotes and neat collection of Irishisms.'

'No,' replied the colonel, descending. 'That 's a spring works of itself and has discovered the secret of continuous motion, more 's the pity !—unless you 'll be pleased to make it of use to Science.'

He gave a laugh of good humour.

'Your laughter, Horace, is a capital comment on your wit.'

Willoughby said it with the air of one who has flicked a whip.

'Tis a genial advertisement of a vacancy,' said De Craye.

‘Precisely : three parts auctioneer to one for the property.’

‘Oh ! if you have a musical quack, score it a point in his favour, Willoughby, though you don’t swallow his drug.’

‘If he means to be musical, let him keep time.’

‘Am I late ?’ said De Craye to the ladies, proving himself an adept in the art of being gracefully vanquished and so winning tender hearts.

Willoughby had refreshed himself. At the back of his mind there was a suspicion that his adversary would not have yielded so flatly without an assurance of practically triumphing, secretly getting the better of him ; and it filled him with venom for a further bout at the next opportunity : but as he had been sarcastic and mordant, he had shown Clara what he could do in a way of speaking different from the lamentable cooing stuff, gasps and feeble protestations to which, he knew not how, she reduced him. Sharing the opinion of his race, that blunt personalities, or the pugilistic form, administered directly on the salient features, are exhibitions of mastery in such encounters, he felt strong and solid, eager for the successes of the evening. De Craye was in the first carriage as escort to the ladies Eleanor and Isabel. Willoughby, with Clara, Lætitia and Dr. Middleton followed, all silent, for the Rev. Doctor was ostensibly pondering ; and Willoughby was damped a little when he unlocked his mouth to say :

‘And yet I have not observed that Colonel De Craye is anything of a Celtiberian Egnatius meriting fustigation for an untimely display of well-whitened teeth, sir : “quicquid est, ubicunque est, quodcunque agit, renidet” :—ha ? a morbus neither charming nor urbane to the general eye, however consolatory to the actor. But this gentleman does not offend so, or I am so strangely prepossessed in his favour as to be an incompetent witness.’

Dr. Middleton's persistent ha ? eh ? upon an honest frown of inquiry plucked an answer out of Willoughby, that was meant to be humourously scornful and soon became apologetic under the Doctor's interrogatively grasping gaze.

'These Irishmen,' Willoughby said, 'will play the professional jester, as if it were an office they were born to. We must play critic now and then, otherwise we should have them deluging us with their Joe Millerisms.'

'With their O'Millerisms you would say, perhaps ?'

Willoughby did his duty to the joke, but the Rev. Doctor, though he wore the paternal smile of a man that has begotten hilarity, was not perfectly propitiated, and pursued : 'Nor to my apprehension is "the man's laugh the comment on his wit" unchallengeably new : instances of cousinship germane to the phrase will recur to you. But it has to be noted that it was a phrase of assault ; it was ostentatiously battery : and I would venture to remind you, friend, that among the elect, considering that it is as fatally facile to spring the laugh upon a man as to deprive him of his life, considering that we have only to condescend to the weapon, and that the more popular necessarily the more murderous that weapon is,—among the elect, to which it is your distinction to aspire to belong, the rule holds to abstain from any employment of the obvious, the percoct, and likewise, for your own sake, from the epitonic, the overstrained ; for if the former, by readily assimilating with the understandings of your audience are empowered to commit assassination on your victim, the latter come under the charge of unseemliness, inasmuch as they are a description of public suicide. Assuming, then, manslaughter to be your pastime, and hari-kari not to be your bent, the phrase, to escape criminality, must rise in you as you would have it to fall on him, *ex improviso*. Am I right ?'

‘I am in the habit of thinking it impossible, sir, that you can be in error,’ said Willoughby.

Dr. Middleton left it the more emphatic by saying nothing further.

Both his daughter and Miss Dale, who had disapproved the waspish snap at Colonel De Craye, were in wonderment of the art of speech which could so soothingly inform a gentleman that his behaviour had not been gentlemanly.

Willoughby was damped by what he comprehended of it for a few minutes. In proportion as he realized an evening with his ancient admirers he was restored, and he began to marvel greatly at his folly in not giving banquets and Balls, instead of making a solitude about himself and his bride. For solitude, thought he, is good for the man, the man being a creature consumed by passion ; woman’s love, on the contrary, will only be nourished by the reflex light she catches of you in the eyes of others, she having no passion of her own, but simply an instinct driving her to attach herself to whatsoever is most largely admired, most shining. So thinking, he determined to change his course of conduct, and he was happier. In the first gush of our wisdom drawn directly from experience, there is a mental intoxication that cancels the old world and establishes a new one, not allowing us to ask whether it is too late.

CHAPTER XXX

TREATING OF THE DINNER-PARTY AT MRS. MOUNTSTUART JENKINSON’S

VERNON and young Crossjay had tolerably steady work together for a couple of hours, varied by the arrival of a plate of meat on a tray for the master, and some interro-

gations put to him from time to time by the boy in reference to Miss Middleton. Crossjay made the discovery that if he abstained from alluding to Miss Middleton's beauty he might water his dusty path with her name nearly as much as he liked. Mention of her beauty incurred a reprimand. On the first occasion his master was wistful. 'Isn't she glorious !' Crossjay fancied he had started a sovereign receipt for blessed deviations. He tried it again, but pædagogue-thunder broke over his head.

'Yes, only I can't understand what she means, Mr. Whitford,' he excused himself. 'First I was not to tell ; I know I wasn't, because she said so ; she quite as good as said so. Her last words were, " Mind, Crossjay, you know nothing about me," when I stuck to that beast of a tramp, who 's a " walking moral," and gets money out of people by snuffling it.'

'Attend to your lesson, or you 'll be one,' said Vernon.

'Yes, but, Mr. Whitford, now I *am* to tell. I'm to answer straight out to every question.'

'Miss Middleton is anxious that you should be truthful.'

'Yes, but in the morning she told me *not* to tell.'

'She was in a hurry. She has it on her conscience that you may have misunderstood her, and she wishes you never to be guilty of an untruth, least of all on her account.'

Crossjay committed an unspoken resolution to the air in a violent sigh : ' Ah ! ' and said : ' If I were sure ! '

'Do as she bids you, my boy.'

'But I don't know what it is she wants.'

'Hold to her last words to you.'

'So I do. If she told me to run till I dropped, on I 'd go.'

'She told you to study your lessons : do that.'

Crossjay buckled to his book, invigorated by an imagination of his liege lady on the page.

After a studious interval, until the impression of his lady had subsided, he resumed : ' She 's so funny ! She 's just like a girl, and then she 's a lady too. She 's my idea of a princess. And Colonel De Craye ! Wasn't he taught dancing ! When he says something funny he ducks and seems to be setting to his partner. I should like to be as clever as her father. That is a clever man ! I daresay Colonel De Craye will dance with her to-night. I wish I was there.'

' It 's a dinner-party, not a dance,' Vernon forced himself to say, to dispel that ugly vision.

' Isn't it, sir ? I thought they danced after dinner-parties. Mr. Whitford, have you ever seen her run ? '

Vernon pointed him to his task.

They were silent for a lengthened period.

' But does Miss Middleton mean me to speak out if Sir Willoughby asks me ? ' said Crossjay.

' Certainly. You needn't make much of it. All 's plain and simple.'

' But I 'm positive, Mr. Whitford, he wasn't to hear of her going to the post-office with me before breakfast. And how did Colonel De Craye find her and bring her back, with that old Flitch ? He 's a man and can go where he pleases, and I 'd have found her too, give me the chance. You know, I 'm fond of Miss Dale, but she—I 'm very fond of her—but you can't think she 's a girl as well. And about Miss Dale, when she says a thing, there it is, clear. But Miss Middleton has a lot of meanings. Never mind ; I go by what 's inside and I 'm pretty sure to please her.'

' Take your chin off your hand and your elbow off the book, and fix yourself,' said Vernon, wrestling with the seduction of Crossjay's idolatry, for Miss Middleton's

appearance had been preternaturally sweet on her departure, and the next pleasure to seeing her was hearing of her from the lips of this passionate young poet.

‘Remember that you please her by speaking truth,’ Vernon added, and laid himself open to questions upon the truth, by which he learnt, with a perplexed sense of envy and sympathy, that the boy’s idea of truth strongly approximated to his conception of what should be agreeable to Miss Middleton.

He was lonely, bereft of the bard, when he had tucked Crossjay up in his bed and left him. Books he could not read; thoughts were disturbing. A seat in the library and a stupid stare helped to pass the hours, and but for the spot of sadness moving meditation in spite of his effort to stun himself, he would have borne a happy resemblance to an idiot in the sun. He had verily no command of his reason. She was too beautiful! Whatever she did was best. That was the refrain of the fountain-song in him; the burden being her whims, variations, inconsistencies, wiles; her tremblings between good and naughty, that might be stamped to noble or to terrible; her sincerity, her duplicity, her courage, cowardice, possibilities for heroism and for treachery. By dint of dwelling on the theme, he magnified the young lady to extraordinary stature. And he had sense enough to own that her character was yet liquid in the mould, and that she was a creature of only naturally youthful wildness provoked to freakishness by the ordeal of a situation shrewd as any that can happen to her sex in civilized life. But he was compelled to think of her extravagantly, and he leaned a little to the discrediting of her, because her actual image unmanned him and was unbearable: and to say at the end of it ‘She is too beautiful! whatever she does is best,’ smoothed away the wrong he did her. Had it been in his power he would have thought of her in the abstract

—the stage contiguous to that which he adopted : but the attempt was luckless ; the Stagyrite would have failed in it. What philosopher could have set down that face of sun and breeze and nymph in shadow as a point in a problem ?

The library-door was opened at midnight by Miss Dale. She closed it quietly. ‘ You are not working, Mr. Whitford ? I fancied you would wish to hear of the evening. Professor Crooklyn arrived after all ! Mrs. Mountstuart is bewildered : she says she expected you, and that you did not excuse yourself to her, and she cannot comprehend, *et cætera*. That is to say, she chooses bewilderment to indulge in the exclamatory. She must be very much annoyed. The professor did come by the train she drove to meet ! ’

‘ I thought it probable,’ said Vernon.

‘ He had to remain a couple of hours at the Railway Inn : no conveyance was to be found for him. He thinks he has caught a cold, and cannot stifle his fretfulness about it. He may be as learned as Dr. Middleton ; he has not the same happy constitution. Nothing more unfortunate could have occurred ; he spoilt the party. Mrs. Mountstuart tried petting him, which drew attention to him and put us all in his key for several awkward minutes, more than once. She lost her head ; she was unlike herself. I may be presumptuous in criticizing her, but should not the president of a dinner-table treat it like a battle-field, and let the guest that sinks descend, and not allow the voice of a discordant, however illustrious, to rule it ? Of course, it is when I see failures that I fancy I could manage so well : comparison is prudently reserved in the other cases. I am a daring critic, no doubt because I know I shall never be tried by experiment. I have no ambition to be tried.’

She did not notice a smile of Vernon’s, and continued :

'Mrs. Mountstuart gave him the lead upon any subject he chose. I thought the Professor never would have ceased talking of a young lady who had been at the inn before him drinking hot brandy and water with a gentleman !'

'How did he hear of that ?' cried Vernon, roused by the malignity of the Fates.

'From the landlady, trying to comfort him. And a story of her lending shoes and stockings while those of the young lady were drying. He has the dreadful snappish humourous way of recounting which impresses it ; the table took up the subject of this remarkable young lady, and whether she was a lady of the neighbourhood, and who she could be that went abroad on foot in heavy rain. It was painful to me ; I knew enough to be sure of who she was.'

'Did she betray it ?'

'No.'

'Did Willoughby look at her ?'

'Without suspicion then.'

'Then ?'

'Colonel De Craye was diverting us, and he was very amusing. Mrs. Mountstuart told him afterwards that he ought to be paid salvage for saving the wreck of her party. Sir Willoughby was a little too cynical : he talked well ; what he said was good, but it was not good-humoured : he has not the reckless indifference of Colonel De Craye to uttering nonsense that amusement may come of it. And in the drawing-room he lost such gaiety as he had. I was close to Mrs. Mountstuart when Professor Crooklyn approached her and spoke in my hearing of *that* gentleman and *that* young lady. They were, you could see by his nods, Colonel De Craye and Miss Middleton.'

'And she at once mentioned it to Willoughby !'

‘Colonel De Craye gave her no chance, if she sought it. He courted her profusely. Behind his rattle he must have brains. It ran in all directions to entertain her and her circle.’

‘Willoughby knows nothing?’

‘I cannot judge. He stood with Mrs. Mountstuart a minute as we were taking leave. She looked strange. I heard her say, “The rogue.” He laughed. She lifted her shoulders. He scarcely opened his mouth on the way home.’

‘The thing must run its course,’ Vernon said, with the philosophical air which is desperation rendered decorous. ‘Willoughby deserves it. A man of full growth ought to know that nothing on earth tempts Providence so much as the binding of a young woman against her will. Those two are mutually attracted: they’re both . . . They meet and the mischief’s done: both are bright. He can persuade with a word. Another might discourse like an angel and it would be useless. I said everything I could think of, to no purpose. And so it is: there are those attractions!—just as, with her, Willoughby is the reverse, he repels. I’m in about the same predicament—or should be if she were plighted to me. That is, for the length of five minutes; about the space of time I should require for the formality of handing her back her freedom. How a sane man can imagine a girl like that . . .! But if she has changed, she has changed! You can’t conciliate a withered affection. This detaining her, and tricking, and not listening, only increases her aversion; she learns the art in turn. Here she is, detained by fresh plots to keep Dr. Middleton at the Hall. That’s true, is it not?’ He saw that it was. ‘No, she’s not to blame! She has told him her mind; he won’t listen. The question then is, whether she keeps to her word, or breaks it. It’s a dispute between a conventional idea

of obligation and an injury to her nature. Which is the more dishonourable thing to do? Why, you and I see in a moment that her feelings guide her best. It's one of the few cases in which nature may be consulted like an oracle.'

'Is she so sure of her nature?' said Miss Dale.

'You may doubt it; I do not. I am surprised at her coming back. De Craye is a man of the world, and advised it, I suppose. He——well, I never had the persuasive tongue, and my failing doesn't count for much.'

'But the suddenness of the intimacy!'

'The disaster is rather famous "at first sight." He came in a fortunate hour . . . for him. A pigmy's a giant if he can manage to arrive in season. Did you not notice that there was danger, at their second or third glance? You counselled me to hang on here, where the amount of good I do in proportion to what I have to endure is microscopic.'

'It was against your wishes, I know,' said Lætitia, and when the words were out she feared that they were tentative. Her delicacy shrank from even seeming to sound him in relation to a situation so delicate as Miss Middleton's.

The same sentiment guarded him from betraying himself, and he said: 'Partly against. We both foresaw the possible—because, like most prophets, we knew a little more of circumstances enabling us to see the fatal. A pigmy would have served, but De Craye is a handsome, intelligent, pleasant fellow.'

'Sir Willoughby's friend!'

'Well, in these affairs! A great deal must be charged on the Goddess.'

'That is really Pagan fatalism!'

'Our modern word for it is Nature. Science condescends to speak of natural selection. Look at these!

They are both graceful and winning and witty, bright to mind and eye, made for one another, as country people say. I can't blame him. Besides we don't know that he's guilty. We're quite in the dark, except that we're certain how it must end. If the chance should occur to you of giving Willoughby a word of counsel—it may—you might, without irritating him as my knowledge of his plight does, hint at your eyes being open. His insane dread of a detective world makes him artificially blind. As soon as he fancies himself seen, he sets to work spinning a web, and he discerns nothing else. It's generally a clever kind of web; but if it's a tangle to others it's the same to him, and a veil as well. He is preparing the catastrophe, he forces the issue. Tell him of her extreme desire to depart. Treat her as mad, to soothe him. Otherwise one morning he will wake a second time . . . ! It is perfectly certain. And the second time it will be entirely his own fault. Inspire him with some philosophy.'

'I have none.'

'If I thought so, I would say you have better. There are two kinds of philosophy, mine and yours. Mine comes of coldness, yours of devotion.'

'He is unlikely to choose me for his confidante.'

Vernon meditated. 'One can never quite guess what he will do, from never knowing the heat of the centre in him which precipitates his actions: he has a great art of concealment. As to me, as you perceive, my views are too philosophical to let me be of use to any of them. I blame only the one who holds to the bond. The sooner I am gone!—in fact, I cannot stay on. So Dr. Middleton and the Professor did not strike fire together?'

'Dr. Middleton was ready and pursued him, but Professor Crooklyn insisted on shivering. His line of blank verse: "A Railway platform and a Railway

inn ! ” became pathetic in repetition. He must have suffered.’

‘ Somebody has to ! ’

‘ Why the innocent ? ’

‘ He arrives à propos. But remember that Fridolin sometimes contrives to escape and have the guilty scorched. The Professor would not have suffered if he had missed his train, as he appears to be in the habit of doing. Thus his unaccustomed good fortune was the cause of his bad.’

‘ You saw him on the platform ? ’

‘ I am unacquainted with the Professor. I had to get Mrs. Mountstuart out of the way.’

‘ She says she described him to you. “ Complexion of a sweetbread, consistency of a quenelle, grey, and like a Saint without his dish behind the head.” ’

‘ Her descriptions are strikingly accurate, but she forgot to sketch his back, and all that I saw was a narrow sloping back and a broad hat resting the brim on it. My report to her spoke of an old gentleman of dark complexion, as the only traveller on the platform. She has faith in the efficiency of her descriptive powers, and so she was willing to drive off immediately.—The intention was a start to London. Colonel De Craye came up and effected in five minutes what I could not compass in thirty.’

‘ But you saw Colonel De Craye pass you ? ’

‘ My work was done ; I should have been an intruder. Besides I was acting wet jacket with Mrs. Mountstuart to get her to drive off fast, or she might have jumped out in search of her Professor herself.’

‘ She says you were lean as a fork, with the wind whistling through the prongs.’

‘ You see how easy it is to deceive one who is an artist in phrases. Avoid them, Miss Dale ; they dazzle the penetration of the composer. That is why people of

ability like Mrs. Mountstuart see so little ; they are so bent on describing brilliantly. However, she is kind and charitable at heart. I have been considering to-night that, to cut this knot as it is now, Miss Middleton might do worse than speak straight out to Mrs. Mountstuart. No one else would have such influence with Willoughby. The simple fact of Mrs. Mountstuart's knowing of it would be almost enough. But courage would be required for that. Good night, Miss Dale.'

'Good night, Mr. Whitford. You pardon me for disturbing you ?'

Vernon pressed her hand reassuringly. He had but to look at her and review her history to think his cousin Willoughby punished by just retribution. Indeed for any maltreatment of the dear boy Love by man or by woman, coming under your cognizance, you, if you be of common soundness, shall behold the retributive blow struck in your time.

Miss Dale retired thinking how like she and Vernon were to one another in the toneless condition they had achieved through sorrow. He succeeded in masking himself from her, owing to her awe of the circumstances. She reproached herself for not having the same devotion to the cold idea of duty as he had ; and though it provoked inquiry, she would not stop to ask why he had left Miss Middleton a prey to the sparkling colonel. It seemed a proof of the philosophy he preached.

As she was passing by young Crossjay's bedroom-door a face appeared. Sir Willoughby slowly emerged and presented himself in his full length, beseeching her to banish alarm.

He said it in a hushed voice, with a face qualified to create the sentiment.

'Are you tired ? sleepy ?' said he.

She protested that she was not ; she intended to read for an hour.

He begged to have the hour dedicated to him. ' I shall be relieved by conversing with a friend.'

No subterfuge crossed her mind ; she thought his midnight visit to the boy's bedside a pretty feature in him ; she was full of pity too ; she yielded to the strange request, feeling that it did not become ' an old woman ' to attach importance even to the public discovery of midnight interviews involving herself as one, and feeling also that she was being treated as an old friend in the form of a very old woman. Her mind was bent on arresting any recurrence to the project she had so frequently outlined in the tongue of innuendo, of which, because of her repeated tremblings under it, she thought him a master.

He conducted her along the corridor to the private sitting-room of the ladies Eleanor and Isabel.

' Deceit ! ' he said, while lighting the candles on the mantelpiece.

She was earnestly compassionate, and a word that could not relate to her personal destinies refreshed her by displacing her apprehensive antagonism and giving pity free play.

CHAPTER XXXI

SIR WILLOUGHBY ATTEMPTS AND ACHIEVES PATHOS

BOTH were seated. Apparently he would have preferred to watch her dark downcast eyelashes in silence under sanction of his air of abstract meditation and the melancholy superinducing it. Blood-colour was in her cheeks ; the party had inspirited her features. Might it be that lively company, an absence of economical solitudes

and a flourishing home were all she required to make her bloom again? The supposition was not hazardous in presence of her heightened complexion.

She raised her eyes. He could not meet her look without speaking.

‘Can *you* forgive deceit?’

‘It would be to boast of more charity than I know myself to possess, were I to say that I can, Sir Willoughby. I hope I am able to forgive. I cannot tell. I should like to say yes.’

‘Could you live with the deceiver?’

‘No.’

‘No. I could have given that answer for you. No semblance of union should be maintained between the deceiver and ourselves. Lætitia!’

‘Sir Willoughby?’

‘Have I no right to your name?’

‘If it please you to . . .’

‘I speak as my thoughts run, and they did not know a Miss Dale so well as a dear Lætitia: my truest friend! You have talked with Clara Middleton?’

‘We had a conversation.’

Her brevity affrighted him. He flew off in a cloud.

‘Reverting to that question of deceivers: is it not your opinion that to pardon, to condone, is to corrupt society by passing off as pure what is false? Do we not,’ he wore the smile of haggard playfulness of a convalescent child the first day back to its toys, ‘Lætitia, do we not impose a counterfeit on the currency?’

‘Supposing it to be really deception.’

‘Apart from my loathing of deception, of falseness in any shape, upon any grounds, I hold it an imperious duty to expose, punish, off with it. I take it to be one of the forms of noxiousness which a good citizen is bound to extirpate. I am not myself good citizen enough, I

confess, for much more than passive abhorrence. I do not forgive : I am at heart serious and I cannot forgive :—there is no possible reconciliation, there can be only an ostensible truce, between the two hostile powers dividing this world.'

She glanced at him quickly.

' Good and evil ! ' he said.

Her face expressed a surprise relapsing on the heart.

He spelt the puckers of her forehead to mean, that she feared he might be speaking unchristianly.

' You will find it so in all religions, my dear Lætitia : the Hindoo, the Persian, ours. It is universal ; an experience of our humanity. Deceit and sincerity cannot live together. Truth must kill the lie, or the lie will kill truth. I do not forgive. All I say to the person is, go ! '

' But that is right ! that is generous ! ' exclaimed Lætitia, glad to approve him for the sake of blinding her critical soul, and relieved by the idea of Clara's difficulty solved.

' *Capable* of generosity perhaps,' he mused aloud.

She wounded him by not supplying the expected enthusiastic asseveration of her belief in his general tendency to magnanimity.

He said after a pause : ' But the world is not likely to be impressed by anything not immediately gratifying it. People change, I find : as we increase in years we cease to be the heroes we were ! I myself am insensible to change : I do not admit the charge. Except in this, we will say : personal ambition. I have it no more. And what is it when we have it ? Decidedly a confession of inferiority ! That is, the desire to be distinguished is an acknowledgement of insufficiency. But I have still the craving for my dearest friends to think well of me. A weakness ? Call it so. Not a dishonourable weakness ! '

Lætitia racked her brain for the connection of his present speech with the preceding dialogue. She was baffled, from not knowing 'the heat of the centre in him' as Vernon opaquely phrased it in charity to the object of her worship.

'Well,' said he, unappeased, 'and besides the passion to excel, I have changed somewhat in the heartiness of my thirst for the amusements incident to my station. I do not care to keep a stud—I was once tempted: nor hounds. And I can remember the day when I determined to have the best kennels and the best breed of horses in the kingdom. Puerile! What is distinction of that sort, or of any acquisition and accomplishment? We ask! One's *self* is not the greater. To seek it, owns to our smallness, in real fact; and when it is attained, what then? My horses are good, they are admired, I challenge the county to surpass them: well? These are but my horses; the praise is of the animals, not of me. I decline to share in it. Yet I know men content to swallow the praise of their beasts and be semi-equine. The littleness of one's fellows in the mob of life is a very strange experience! One may regret to have lost the simplicity of one's forefathers, which could accept those and other distinctions with a cordial pleasure, not to say pride. As for instance, I am, as it is called, a dead shot. "Give your acclamations, gentlemen, to my ancestors, from whom I inherited a steady hand and quick sight." They do not touch *me*. Where I do not find myself—that I am *essentially* I—no applause can move me. To speak to you as I would speak to none, admiration—you know that in my early youth I swam in flattery—I had to swim to avoid drowning!—admiration of my personal gifts has grown tasteless. Changed, therefore, inasmuch as there has been a growth of spirituality. We are all in submission to mortal laws, and so far I have indeed

changed. I may add that it is unusual for country gentlemen to apply themselves to scientific researches. These are, however, in the spirit of the time. I apprehended that instinctively when at College. I forsook the classics for science. And thereby escaped the vice of domineering self-sufficiency peculiar to classical men, of which you had an amusing example in the carriage, on the way to Mrs. Mountstuart's this evening. Science is modest ; slow, if you like : it deals with facts, and having mastered them, it masters men ; of necessity, not with a stupid loud-mouthed arrogance : words big and oddly-garbed as the Pope's body-guard ! Of course, one bows to the Infallible ; we must, when his giant-mercenaries level bayonets !'

Sir Willoughby offered Miss Dale half a minute that she might in gentle feminine fashion acquiesce in the implied reproof of Dr. Middleton's behaviour to him during the drive to Mrs. Mountstuart's. She did not.

Her heart was accusing Clara of having done it a wrong and a hurt. For while he talked he seemed to her to justify Clara's feelings and her conduct : and her own reawakened sensations of injury came to the surface a moment to look at him, affirming that they pardoned him, and pitied, but hardly wondered.

The heat of the centre in him had administered the comfort he wanted, though the conclusive accordant notes he loved on woman's lips, that subservient harmony of another instrument desired of musicians when they have done their solo-playing, came not to wind up the performance : not a single bar. She did not speak. Probably his Lætitia was overcome, as he had long known her to be when they conversed ; nerve-subdued, unable to deploy her mental resources or her musical. Yet ordinarily she had command of the latter.—Was she too condoling ? Did a reason exist for it ? Had the

impulsive and desperate girl spoken out to Lætitia to the fullest ?—shameless daughter of a domineering sire that she was ! Ghastlier inquiry (it struck the centre of him with a sounding ring), was Lætitia pitying him overmuch for worse than the pain of a little difference between lovers—for treason on the part of his bride ? Did she know of a rival ? know more than he ?

When the centre of him was violently struck he was a genius in penetration. He guessed that she did know : and by this was he presently helped to achieve pathos.

‘ So my election was for Science,’ he continued : ‘ and if it makes me, as I fear, a *rara avis* among country gentlemen, it unites me, puts me in the main, I may say, in the only current of progress—a word sufficiently despicable in their political jargon.—You enjoyed your evening at Mrs. Mountstuart’s ? ’

‘ Very greatly.’

‘ She brings her Professor to dine here the day after to-morrow. Does it astonish you ? You started.’

‘ I did not hear the invitation.’

‘ It was arranged at the table : you and I were separated—cruelly, I told her : she declared that we see enough of one another, and that it was good for me that we should be separated ; neither of which is true. I may not have known what is the best for me : I do know what is good. If in my younger days I egregiously erred, that, taken of itself alone, is, assuming me to have sense and feeling, the surer proof of present wisdom. I can testify in person that wisdom is pain. If pain is to add to wisdom, let me suffer ! Do you approve of that, Lætitia ? ’

‘ It is well said.’

‘ It is felt. Those who themselves have suffered should know the benefit of the resolution.’

‘ One may have suffered so much as to wish only for peace.’

‘ True : but you ! have you ? ’

‘ It would be for peace, if I prayed for an earthly gift.’

Sir Willoughby dropped a smile on her. ‘ I mentioned the Pope’s parti-coloured body-guard just now. In my youth their singular attire impressed me. People tell me they have been re-uniformed : I am sorry. They remain one of my liveliest recollections of the Eternal City. They affected my sense of humour, always alert in me, as you are aware. We English have humour. It is the first thing struck in us when we land on the Continent : our risible faculties are generally active all through the tour. Humour, or the clash of sense with novel examples of the absurd, is our characteristic. I do not condescend to boisterous displays of it. I observe, and note the people’s comicalities for my correspondence. But you have read my letters—most of them, if not all ? ’

‘ Many of them.’

‘ I was with you then !—I was about to say—that Swiss-guard reminded me—you have not been in Italy. I have constantly regretted it. You are the very woman, you have the soul for Italy. I know no other of whom I could say it, with whom I should not feel that she was out of place, discordant with me. Italy and Lætitia ! often have I joined you together. We shall see. I begin to have hopes. Here you have literally stagnated. Why, a dinner-party refreshes you ! What would not travel do, and that heavenly climate ! You are a reader of history and poetry. Well, poetry ! I never yet saw the poetry that expressed the tenth part of what I feel in the presence of beauty and magnificence, and when I really meditate—profoundly. Call me a positive mind. I feel : only I feel too intensely for poetry. By the nature of it, poetry cannot be sincere. I will have sincerity. Whatever touches our emotions should be spontaneous, not a craft. I know you are in favour of poetry.

You would win me, if any one could. But history ! there I am with you. Walking over ruins : at night : the arches of the solemn black amphitheatre pouring moonlight on us—the moonlight of Italy ! ’

‘ You would not laugh there, Sir Willoughby ? ’ said Lætitia, rousing herself from a stupor of apprehensive amazement, to utter something and realize actual circumstances.

‘ Besides, you, I think, or I am mistaken in you——’ he deviated from his projected speech—‘ you are not a victim of the sense of association, and the ludicrous.’

‘ I can understand the influence of it : I have at least a conception of the humourous : but ridicule would not strike me in the Coliseum of Rome. I could not bear it, no, Sir Willoughby ! ’

She appeared to be taking him in very strong earnest, by thus petitioning him not to laugh in the Coliseum, and now he said : ‘ Besides, you are one who could accommodate yourself to the society of the ladies, my aunts. Good women, Lætitia ! I cannot imagine them *de trop* in Italy, or in a household. I have of course reason to be partial in my judgement.’

‘ They are excellent and most amiable ladies ; I love them,’ said Lætitia fervently ; the more strongly excited to fervour by her enlightenment as to his drift.

She read it, that he designed to take her to Italy with the ladies ;—after giving Miss Middleton her liberty ; that was necessarily implied. And that was truly generous. In his boyhood he had been famous for his bountifulness in scattering silver and gold. Might he not have caused himself to be misperused in later life ?

Clara had spoken to her of the visit and mission of the ladies to the library : and Lætitia daringly conceived herself to be on the certain track of his meaning, she being able to enjoy their society as she supposed him to

consider that Miss Middleton did not, and would not either abroad or at home.

Sir Willoughby asked her : ‘ You could travel with them ? ’

‘ Indeed I could ! ’

‘ Honestly ? ’

‘ As affirmatively as one may protest. Delightedly.’

‘ Agreed. It is an undertaking.’ He put his hand out. ‘ Whether I be of the party or not ! To Italy, Lætitia ! It would give me pleasure to be with you, and it will, if I must be excluded, to think of you in Italy ! ’

His hand was out. She had to feign inattention or yield her own. She had not the effrontery to pretend not to see, and she yielded it. He pressed it, and whenever it shrank a quarter-inch to withdraw, he shook it up and down, as an instrument that had been lent him for due emphasis to his remarks. And very emphatic an amorous orator can make it upon a captive lady.

‘ I am unable to speak decisively on that or any subject. I am, I think you once quoted, “ tossed like a weed on the ocean.” Of myself I can speak : I cannot speak for a second person. I am infinitely harassed. If I could cry, “ To Italy to-morrow ! ” Ah ! . . . Do not set me down for complaining. I know the lot of man. But Lætitia, deceit ! deceit ! It is a bad taste in the mouth. It sickens us of humanity. I compare it to an earthquake : we lose all our reliance on the solidity of the world. It is a betrayal not simply of the person ; it is a betrayal of humankind. My friend ! Constant friend ! No, I will not despair. Yes, I have faults ; I will remember them. Only, forgiveness is another question. Yes, the injury I *can* forgive : the falseness never. In the interests of humanity, no ! So young, and such deceit ! ’

Lætitia’s bosom rose : her hand was detained : a lady

who has yielded it cannot wrestle to have it back : those outworks which protect her, treacherously shelter the enemy aiming at the citadel when he has taken them. In return for the silken armour bestowed on her by our civilization, it is exacted that she be soft and civil nigh up to perishing-point. She breathed tremulously high, saying on her top-breath : ‘ If it—it may not be so ; it can scarcely . . . ’ A deep sigh intervened. It saddened her that she knew so much.

‘ For when I love, I love,’ said Sir Willoughby ; ‘ my friends and my servants know that. There can be no medium : not with me. I give all, I claim all. As I am absorbed, so must I absorb. We both cancel and create, we extinguish and we illumine one another. The error may be in the choice of an object : it is not in the passion. Perfect confidence, perfect abandonment. I repeat, I claim it because I give it. The selfishness of love may be denounced : it is a part of us ! My answer would be, it is an element only of the noblest of us ! Love, Lætitia ! I speak of love. But one who breaks faith to drag us through the mire, who betrays, betrays and hands us over to the world ; whose prey we become identically because of virtues we were educated to think it a blessing to possess : tell me the name for that !—Again : it has ever been a principle with me to respect the sex. But if we see women false, treacherous. . . . Why indulge in these abstract views, you would ask ! The world presses them on us, full as it is of the vilest specimens. They seek to pluck up every rooted principle : they sneer at our worship : they rob us of our religion. This bitter experience of the world drives us back to the antidote of what we knew before we plunged into it : of one . . . of something we esteemed and still esteem. Is that antidote strong enough to expel the poison ? I hope so ! I believe so ! To lose faith in womankind is terrible.’

He studied her. She looked distressed : she was not moved.

She was thinking that, with the exception of a strain of haughtiness, he talked excellently to men, at least in the tone of the things he meant to say ; but that his manner of talking to women went to an excess in the artificial tongue—the tutored tongue of sentimental deference of the towering male : he fluted exceedingly ; and she wondered whether it was this which had wrecked him with Miss Middleton.

His intuitive sagacity counselled him to strive for pathos to move her. It was a task ; for while he perceived her to be not ignorant of his plight, he doubted her knowing the extent of it, and as his desire was merely to move her without an exposure of himself, he had to compass being pathetic as it were under the impediments of a mailed and gauntleted knight, who cannot easily heave the bosom, or show it heaving.

Moreover pathos is a tide : often it carries the awakener of it off his feet, and whirls him over and over, armour and all in ignominious attitudes of helpless prostration, whereof he may well be ashamed in the retrospect. We cannot quite preserve our dignity when we stoop to the work of calling forth tears. Moses had probably to take a nimble jump away from the rock after that venerable Law-giver had knocked the water out of it.

However, it was imperative in his mind that he should be sure he had the power to move her.

He began : clumsily at first, as yonder gauntleted knight attempting the briny handkerchief :

‘ What are we ! We last but a very short time. Why not live to gratify our appetites ? I might really ask myself why. All the means of satiating them are at my disposal. But no : I must aim at the highest :—at that which in my blindness I took for the highest. You know the sportsman’s instinct, Lætitia ; he is not tempted by the

stationary object. Such are we in youth, toying with happiness, leaving it, to aim at the dazzling and attractive.'

'We gain knowledge,' said Lætitia.

'At what cost!'

The exclamation summoned self-pity to his aid, and pathos was handy.

'By paying half our lives for it and all our hopes! Yes, we gain knowledge, we are the wiser; very probably my value surpasses now what it was when I was happier. But the loss! That youthful bloom of the soul is like health to the body; once gone, it leaves cripples behind. Nay, my friend and precious friend, these four fingers I must retain. They seem to me the residue of a wreck: you shall be released shortly: absolutely, Lætitia, I have nothing else remaining.—We have spoken of deception: what of being undeceived?—when one whom we adored is laid bare, and the wretched consolation of a worthy object is denied to us. No misfortune can be like that. Were it death, we could worship still. Death would be preferable. But may you be spared to know a situation in which the comparison with your inferior is forced on you to your disadvantage and your loss because of your generously giving up your whole heart to the custody of some shallow, light-minded, self——! . . . we will not deal in epithets. If I were to find as many bad names for the serpent as there are spots on his body, it would be serpent still, neither better nor worse. . . . The loneliness! And the darkness! Our luminary is extinguished. Self-respect refuses to continue worshipping, but the affection will not be turned aside. We are literally in the dust, we grovel, we would fling away self-respect if we could; we would adopt for a model the creature preferred to us; we would humiliate, degrade ourselves; we cry for justice as if it were for pardon . . .'

'For pardon! when we are straining to grant it!'

Lætitia murmured, and it was as much as she could do. She remembered how in her old misery her efforts after charity had twisted her round to feel herself the sinner, and beg forgiveness in prayer : a noble sentiment, that filled her with pity of the bosom in which it had sprung. There was no similarity between his idea and hers, but her idea had certainly been roused by his word ‘ pardon,’ and he had the benefit of it in the moisture of her eyes. Her lips trembled, tears fell.

He had heard something ; he had not caught the words, but they were manifestly favourable ; her sign of emotion assured him of it and of the success he had sought. There was one woman who bowed to him to all eternity ! He had inspired one woman with the mysterious man-desired passion of self-abandonment, self-immolation ! The evidence was before him. At any instant he could, if he pleased, fly to her and command her enthusiasm.

He had, in fact, perhaps by sympathetic action, succeeded in striking the same springs of pathos in her which animated his lively endeavour to produce it in himself.

He kissed her hand ; then released it, quitting his chair to bend above her soothingly.

‘ Do not weep, Lætitia, you see that I do not : I can smile. Help me to bear it ; you must not unman me.’

She tried to stop her crying ; but self-pity threatened to rain all her long years of grief on her head, and she said : ‘ I must go . . . I am unfit . . . good night, Sir Willoughby.’

Fearing seriously that he had sunk his pride too low in her consideration, and had been carried farther than he intended on the tide of pathos, he remarked : ‘ We will speak about Crossjay to-morrow. His deceitfulness has been gross. As I said, I am grievously offended by deception. But you are tired. Good night, my dear friend.’

‘ Good night, Sir Willoughby.’

She was allowed to go forth.

Colonel De Craye coming up from the smoking-room, met her and noticed the state of her eyelids, as he wished her good night. He saw Willoughby in the room she had quitted, but considerately passed without speaking, and without reflecting why he was considerate.

Our hero's review of the scene made him on the whole satisfied with his part in it. Of his power upon one woman he was now perfectly sure :—Clara had agonized him with a doubt of his personal mastery of any. One, was a poor feast, but the pangs of his flesh during the last few days and the latest hours, caused him to snatch at it, hungrily if contemptuously. A poor feast, she was yet a fortress, a point of succour, both shield and lance ; a cover and an impetus. He could now encounter Clara boldly. Should she resist and defy him, he would not be naked and alone ; he foresaw that he might win honour in the world's eye from his position :—a matter to be thought of only in most urgent need. The effect on him of his recent exercise in pathos was to compose him to slumber. He was for the period well-satisfied.

His attendant imps were well-satisfied likewise, and danced a round about his bed after the vigilant gentleman had ceased to debate on the question of his unveiling of himself past forgiveness of her to Lætitia, and had surrendered unto benignant sleep the present direction of his affairs.

CHAPTER XXXII

LÆTITIA DALE DISCOVERS A SPIRITUAL CHANGE AND
DR. MIDDLETON A PHYSICAL

CLARA tripped over the lawn in the early morning to Lætitia to greet her. She broke away from a colloquy

with Colonel De Craye under Sir Willoughby's windows. The colonel had been one of the bathers, and he stood like a circus driver, flicking a wet towel at Crossjay capering.

'My dear, I am very unhappy!' said Clara.

'My dear, I bring you news,' Lætitia replied.

'Tell me. But the poor boy is to be expelled! He burst into Crossjay's bed-room last night, and dragged the sleeping boy out of bed to question him, and he had the truth. That is one comfort: only Crossjay is to be driven from the Hall because he was untruthful previously—for me: to serve me; really, I feel it was at my command. Crossjay will be out of the way to-day and has promised to come back at night to try to be forgiven. You must help me, Lætitia.'

'You are free, Clara! If you desire it, you have but to ask for your freedom.'

'You mean . . . ?'

'He will release you.'

'You are sure?'

'We had a long conversation last night.'

'I owe it to you?'

'Nothing is owing to me. He volunteered it.'

Clara made as if to lift her eyes in apostrophe. 'Professor Crooklyn! Professor Crooklyn! I see. I did not guess that!'

'Give credit for some generosity, Clara; you are unjust.'

'By-and-by: I will be more than just by-and-by. I will practise on the trumpet: I will lecture on the greatness of the souls of men when we know them thoroughly. At present we do but half know them, and we are unjust. You are not deceived, Lætitia? There is to be no speaking to papa? no delusions? You have agitated me. I feel myself a very small person indeed. I feel I can understand those who admire him. He gives me back my word simply? clearly? without—Oh! that long wrangle in

scenes and letters ? And it will be arranged for papa and me to go not later than to-morrow ? Never shall I be able to explain to any one how I fell into this ! I am frightened at myself when I think of it. I take the whole blame : I have been scandalous. And dear Lætitia ! you came out so early in order to tell me ? ’

‘ I wished you to hear it. ’

‘ Take my heart. ’

‘ Present me with a part—but for good ! ’

‘ Fie ! But you have a right to say it. ’

‘ I mean no unkindness ; but is not the heart you allude to an alarmingly searching one ? ’

‘ Selfish it is, for I have been forgetting Crossjay. If we are going to be generous, is not Crossjay to be forgiven ? If it were only that the boy’s father is away fighting for his country, endangering his life day by day, and for a stipend not enough to support his family, we are bound to think of the boy ! Poor dear silly lad ! with his “ I say, Miss Middleton, why wouldn’t (some one) see my father when he came here to call on him, and had to walk back ten miles in the rain ? ”—I could almost fancy that did me mischief . . . But we have a splendid morning after yesterday’s rain. And we will be generous. Own, Lætitia, that it is possible to gild the most glorious day of creation. ’

‘ Doubtless the spirit may do it and make its hues permanent,’ said Lætitia.

‘ You to me, I to you, he to us. Well, then, if he does, it shall be one of my heavenly days. Which is for the probation of experience. We are not yet at sunset. ’

‘ Have you seen Mr. Whitford this morning ? ’

‘ He passed me. ’

‘ Do not imagine him ever ill-tempered. ’

‘ I had a governess, a learned lady, who taught me in person the picturesqueness of grumpiness. Her temper

was ever perfect, because she was never in the wrong, but I being so, she was grumpy. She carried my iniquity under her brows, and looked out on me through it. I was a trying child.'

Lætitia said, laughing : ' I can believe it ! '

' Yet I liked her and she liked me : we were a kind of foreground and background : she threw me into relief, and I was an apology for her existence.'

' You picture her to me.'

' She says of me now, that I am the only creature she has loved. Who knows that I may not come to say the same of her ? '

' You would plague her and puzzle her still.'

' Have I plagued and puzzled Mr. Whitford ? '

' He reminds you of her ? '

' You said you had her picture.'

' Ah ! do not laugh at him. He is a true friend.'

' The man who can be a friend is the man who will presume to be a censor.'

' A mild one.'

' As to the sentence he pronounces, I am unable to speak, but his forehead is Rhadamanthine condemnation.'

' Dr. Middleton ! '

Clara looked round. ' Who ? I ? Did you hear an echo of papa ? He would never have put Rhadamanthus over European souls, because it appears that Rhadamanthus judged only the Asiatic ; so you are wrong, Miss Dale. My father is infatuated with Mr. Whitford. What can it be ? We women cannot sound the depths of scholars, probably because their pearls have no value in our market ; except when they deign to chasten an impertinent ; and Mr. Whitford stands aloof from any notice of small fry. He is deep, studious, excellent ; and does it not strike you that if he descended among us he would be like a Triton ashore ? '

Lætitia's habit of wholly subservient sweetness, which was her ideal of the feminine, not yet conciliated with her acuter character, owing to the absence of full pleasure from her life—the unhealed wound she had sustained and the cramp of a bondage of such old date as to seem iron—induced her to say, as if consenting : ‘ You think he is not quite at home in society ? ’ But she wished to defend him strenuously, and as a consequence she had to quit the self-imposed ideal of her daily acting, whereby—the case being unwonted, very novel to her—the lady's intelligence became confused through the process that quickened it ; so sovereign a method of hoodwinking our bright selves is the acting of a part, however naturally it may come to us ! and to this will each honest autobiographical member of the animated world bear witness.

She added : ‘ You have not found him sympathetic ? He is. You fancy him brooding, gloomy ? He is the reverse ; he is cheerful, he is indifferent to personal misfortune. Dr. Corney says there is no laugh like Vernon Whitford's, and no humour like his. Latterly he certainly . . . but it has not been your cruel word grumpiness. The truth is, he is anxious about Crossjay : and about other things ; and he wants to leave. He is at a disadvantage beside very lively and careless gentlemen at present, but your “ Triton ashore,” is unfair, it is ugly. He is, I can say, the truest man I know.’

‘ I did not question his goodness, Lætitia.’

‘ You threw an accent on it.’

‘ Did I ? I must be like Crossjay, who declares he likes fun best.’

‘ Crossjay ought to know him, if anybody should. Mr. Whitford has defended you against me, Clara, ever since I took to calling you Clara. Perhaps when you supposed him so like your ancient governess, he was meditating how he could aid you. Last night he gave me reasons for

thinking you would do wisely to confide in Mrs. Mountstuart. It is no longer necessary. I merely mention it. He is a devoted friend.'

'He is an untiring pedestrian.'

'Oh!'

Colonel De Craye, after hovering near the ladies in the hope of seeing them divide, now adopted the method of making three that two may come of it.

As he joined them with his glittering chatter, Lætitia looked at Clara to consult her, and saw the face rosy as a bride's.

The suspicion she had nursed sprang out of her arms a muscular fact on the spot.

'Where is my dear boy?' Clara said.

'Out for a holiday,' the colonel answered in her tone.

'Advise Mr. Whitford not to waste his time in searching for Crossjay, Lætitia. Crossjay is better out of the way to-day. At least, I thought so just now. Has he pocket-money, Colonel De Craye?'

'My lord can command his inn.'

'How thoughtful you are!'

Lætitia's bosom swelled upon a mute exclamation, equivalent to: 'Woman! woman! snared ever by the sparkling and frivolous! undiscerning of the faithful, the modest and beneficent!'

In the secret musings of moralists this dramatic rhetoric survives.

The comparison was all of her own making and she was indignant at the contrast, though to what end she was indignant she could not have said, for she had no idea of Vernon as a rival of De Craye in the favour of a plighted lady. But she was jealous on behalf of her sex: her sex's reputation seemed at stake, and the purity of it was menaced by Clara's idle preference of the shallower man.

When the young lady spoke so carelessly of being like Crossjay, she did not perhaps know that a likeness, based on a similarity of their enthusiasms, loves, and appetites, has been established between women and boys. Lætitia had formerly chafed at it, rejecting it utterly, save when now and then in a season of bitterness she handed here and there a volatile young lady (none but the young) to be stamped with the degrading brand. Vernon might be as philosophical as he pleased. To her the gaiety of these two, Colonel De Craye and Clara Middleton, was distressingly musical: they harmonized painfully. The representative of her sex was hurt by it.

She had to stay beside them: Clara held her arm. The colonel's voice dropped at times to something very like a whisper. He was answered audibly and smoothly. The quick-witted gentleman accepted the correction: but in immediately paying assiduous attentions to Miss Dale, in the approved intriguer's fashion, he showed himself in need of another amounting to a reproof. Clara said: 'We have been consulting, Lætitia, what is to be done to cure Professor Crooklyn of his cold.' De Craye perceived that he had taken a wrong step, and he was mightily surprised that a lesson in intrigue should be read to him of all men. Miss Middleton's audacity was not so astonishing: he recognized grand capabilities in the young lady. Fearing lest she should proceed farther and cut away from him his vantage-ground of secrecy with her, he turned the subject and was adroitly submissive.

Clara's manner of meeting Sir Willoughby expressed a timid disposition to friendliness upon a veiled inquiry, understood by none save Lætitia, whose brain was racked to convey assurances to herself of her not having misinterpreted him. Could there be any doubt? She resolved that there could not be; and it was upon this basis of reason—that she fancied she had led him to it.

Legitimate or not, the fancy sprang from a solid foundation. Yesterday morning she could not have conceived it. Now she was endowed to feel that she had power to influence him, because now, since the midnight, she felt some emancipation from the spell of his physical mastery. He did not appear to her as a different man, but she had grown sensible of being a stronger woman. He was no more the cloud over her, nor the magnet; the cloud once heaven-suffused, the magnet fatally compelling her to sway round to him. She admired him still: his handsome air, his fine proportions, the courtesy of his bending to Clara and touching of her hand, excused a fanatical excess of admiration on the part of a woman in her youth, who is never the anatomist of the hero's lordly graces. But now she admired him piecemeal. When it came to the putting of him together, she did it coldly. To compassionate him was her utmost warmth. Without conceiving in him anything of the strange old monster of earth which had struck the awakened girl's mind of Miss Middleton, Lætitia classed him with other men: he was 'one of them.' And she did not bring her disenchantment as a charge against him. She accused herself, acknowledged the secret of the change to be, that her youthfulness was dead:—otherwise could she have given him compassion, and not herself have been carried on the flood of it? The compassion was fervent, and pure too. She supposed he would supplicate; she saw that Clara Middleton was pleasant with him only for what she expected of his generosity. She grieved. Sir Willoughby was fortified by her sorrowful gaze as he and Clara passed out together to the laboratory arm in arm.

Lætitia had to tell Vernon of the uselessness of his beating the house and grounds for Crossjay. Dr. Middleton held him fast in discussion upon an overnight's classical wrangle with Professor Crooklyn, which was to be renewed

that day. The Professor had appointed to call expressly to renew it. 'A fine scholar,' said the Rev. Doctor, 'but crotchety, like all men who cannot stand their Port.'

'I hear that he had a cold,' Vernon remarked. 'I hope the wine was good, sir.'

As when the foreman of a sentimental jury is commissioned to inform an awful Bench exact in perspicuous English, of a verdict that must of necessity be pronounced in favour of the hanging of the culprit, yet would fain attenuate the crime of a palpable villain by a recommendation to mercy, such foreman, standing in the attentive eye of a master of grammatical construction, and feeling the weight of at least three sentences on his brain, together with a prospect of judicial interrogation for the discovery of his precise meaning, is oppressed, himself is put on trial in turn, and he hesitates, he recapitulates, the fear of involution leads him to be involved; as far as a man so posted may, he on his own behalf appeals for mercy; entreats that his indistinct statement of preposterous reasons may be taken for understood, and would gladly, were permission to do it credible, throw in an imploring word, that he may sink back among the crowd without for the one imperishable moment publicly swinging in his lordship's estimation:—much so, moved by chivalry toward a lady, courtesy to the recollection of a hostess, and particularly by the knowledge that his hearer would expect with a certain frigid rigour charity of him, Dr. Middleton paused, spoke and paused: he stammered. Ladies, he said, were famous poisoners in the Middle Ages. His opinion was, that we had a class of manufacturing wine-merchants on the watch for widows in this country. But he was bound to state the fact of his waking at his usual hour to the minute unassailed by headache. On the other hand, this was a condition of blessedness unanticipated when he went to bed. Mr. Whitford, however, was not to think

that he entertained rancour toward the wine. It was no doubt dispensed with the honourable intention of cheering. In point of flavour execrable, judging by results it was innocuous.

‘The test of it shall be the effect of it upon Professor Crooklyn, and his appearance in the forenoon according to promise,’ Dr. Middleton came to an end with his perturbed balancings. ‘If I hear more of the eight or twelve winds discharged at once upon a railway platform, and the young lady who dries herself of a drenching by drinking brandy and water with a gentleman at a railway inn, I shall solicit your sanction to my condemnation of the wine as anti-Bacchic and a counterfeit presentment. Do not misjudge me. Our hostess is not responsible. But widows should marry.’

‘You must contrive to stop the Professor, sir, if he should attack his hostess in that manner,’ said Vernon.

‘Widows should marry!’ Dr. Middleton repeated.

He murmured of objecting to be at the discretion of a butler : unless, he was careful to add, the aforesaid functionary could boast of an University education : and even then, said he, it requires a line of ancestry to train a man’s taste.

The Rev. Doctor smothered a yawn. The repression of it caused a second one, a real monster, to come, big as our old friend of the sea advancing on the chained-up Beauty.

Disconcerted by this damning evidence of indigestion, his countenance showed that he considered himself to have been too lenient to the wine of an unhusbanded hostess. He frowned terribly.

In the interval Lætitia told Vernon of Crossjay’s flight for the day, hastily bidding the master to excuse him : she had no time to hint the grounds of excuse. Vernon mentally made a guess.

Dr. Middleton took his arm and discharged a volley at

the crotchety scholarship of Professor Crooklyn, whom to confute by book, he directed his march to the library. Having persuaded himself that he was dyspeptic, he had grown irascible. He denounced all dining out, eulogized Patterne Hall as if it were his home, and remembered he had dreamed in the night :—a most humiliating sign of physical disturbance. ‘ But let me find a house in proximity to Patterne, as I am induced to suppose I shall,’ he said, ‘ and here only am I to be met when I stir abroad.’

Lætitia went to her room. She was complacently anxious, enough to prefer solitude and be willing to read. She was more seriously anxious about Crossjay than about any of the others. For Clara would be certain to speak very definitely, and how then could a gentleman oppose her ? He would supplicate, and could she be brought to yield ? It was not to be expected of a young lady who had turned from Sir Willoughby. His inferiors would have had a better chance. Whatever his faults, he had that element of greatness which excludes the intercession of pity. Supplication would be with him a form of condescension. It would be seen to be such. His was a monumental pride that could not stoop. She had preserved this image of the gentleman for a relic in the shipwreck of her idolatry. So she mused between the lines of her book, and finishing her reading and marking the page, she glanced down on the lawn. Dr. Middleton was there, and alone ; his hands behind his back, his head bent. His meditative pace and unwonted perusal of the turf proclaimed that a non-sentimental jury within had delivered an unmitigated verdict upon the widow’s wine. Lætitia hurried to find Vernon.

He was in the hall. As she drew near him, the laboratory door opened and shut.

‘ It is being decided,’ said Lætitia.

Vernon was paler than the hue of perfect calmness.

‘ I want to know whether I ought to take to my heels like Crossjay, and shun the Professor,’ he said.

They spoke in undertones, furtively watching the door.

‘ I wish what she wishes, I am sure, but it will go badly with the boy,’ said Lætitia.

‘ Oh, well, then I ’ll take him,’ said Vernon, ‘ I would rather. I think I can manage it.’

Again the laboratory door opened. This time it shut behind Miss Middleton. She was highly flushed. Seeing them, she shook the storm from her brows, with a dead smile : the best piece of serenity she could put on for public wear.

She took a breath before she moved.

Vernon strode out of the house.

Clara swept up to Lætitia.

‘ You were deceived ! ’

The hard sob of anger barred her voice.

Lætitia begged her to come to her room with her.

‘ I want air : I must be by myself,’ said Clara, catching at her garden-hat.

She walked swiftly to the portico-steps and turned to the right, to avoid the laboratory windows.

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN WHICH THE COMIC MUSE HAS AN EYE ON TWO GOOD SOULS

CLARA met Vernon on the bowling-green among the laurels. She asked him where her father was.

‘ Don’t speak to him now,’ said Vernon.

‘ Mr. Whitford, will you ? ’

‘ It is not adviseable just now. Wait.’

‘ Wait ? Why not now ? ’

‘ He is not in the right humour.’

She choked. There are times when there is no medicine for us in sages, we want slaves ; we scorn to temporize, we must overbear. On she sped, as if she had made the mistake of exchanging words with a post.

The scene between herself and Willoughby was a thick mist in her head, except the burden and result of it, that he held to her fast, would neither assist her to depart nor disengage her.

Oh, men ! men ! They astounded the girl ; she could not define them to her understanding. Their motives, their tastes, their vanity, their tyranny, and the domino on their vanity, the baldness of their tyranny, clenched her in feminine antagonism to brute power. She was not the less disposed to rebellion by a very present sense of the justice of what could be said to reprove her. She had but one answer : ‘ Anything but marry him ! ’ It threw her on her nature, our last and headlong advocate, who is quick as the flood to hurry us from the heights to our level, and lower, if there be accidental gaps in the channel. For say we have been guilty of misconduct : can we redeem it by violating that which we are and live by ? The question sinks us back to the luxuriousness of a sunny relinquishment of effort in the direction against tide. Our nature becomes ingenious in devices, penetrative of the enemy, confidently citing its cause for being frankly elvish or worse. Clara saw a particular way of forcing herself to be surrendered. She shut her eyes from it : the sight carried her too violently to her escape : but her heart caught it up and huzzaed. To press the points of her fingers at her bosom, looking up to the sky as she did, and cry, ‘ I am not my own ; I am his ! ’ was instigation sufficient to make her heart leap up with all her body’s blush to urge it to recklessness. A despairing creature

then may say she has addressed the heavens and has had no answer to restrain her.

Happily for Miss Middleton she had walked some minutes in her chafing fit before the falcon eye of Colonel De Craye spied her away on one of the beech-knolls.

Vernon stood irresolute. It was decidedly not a moment for disturbing Dr. Middleton's composure. He meditated upon a conversation, as friendly as possible, with Willoughby. Round on the front-lawn he beheld Willoughby and Dr. Middleton together, the latter having halted to lend attentive ear to his excellent host. Unnoticed by them or disregarded, Vernon turned back to Lætitia, and sauntered talking with her of things current for as long as he could endure to listen to praise of his pure self-abnegation ; proof of how well he had disguised himself, but it smacked unpleasantly to him. His humourous intimacy with men's minds likened the source of this distaste to the gallant all-or-nothing of the gambler, who hates the little when he cannot have the much, and would rather stalk from the tables clean-picked than suffer ruin to be tickled by dribblets of the glorious fortune he has played for and lost. . If we are not to be beloved, spare us the small coin of compliments on character : especially when they compliment only our acting. It is partly endurable to win eulogy for our stately fortitude in losing, but Lætitia was unaware that he flung away a stake ; so she could not praise him for his merits.

'Willoughby makes the pardoning of Crossjay conditional,' he said, 'and the person pleading for him has to grant the terms. How could you imagine Willoughby would give her up ! How could he ! Who ! . . . He should, is easily said. I was no witness of the scene between them just now, but I could have foretold the end of it ; I could almost recount the passages. The consequence is, that everything depends upon the amount

of courage she possesses. Dr. Middleton won't leave Patterne yet. And it is of no use to speak to him to-day. And she is by nature impatient, and is rendered desperate.'

'Why is it of no use to speak to Dr. Middleton to-day?' said Lætitia.

'He drank wine yesterday that did not agree with him; he can't work. To-day he is looking forward to Patterne Port. He is not likely to listen to any proposals to leave to-day.'

'Goodness!'

'I know the depth of that cry!'

'You are excluded, Mr. Whitford.'

'Not a bit of it; I am in with the rest. Say that men are to be exclaimed at. Men have a right to expect you to know your own mind when you close on a bargain. You don't know the world or yourselves very well, it's true; still the original error is on your side, and upon that you should fix your attention. She brought her father here, and no sooner was he very comfortably established than she wished to dislocate him.'

'I cannot explain it; I cannot comprehend it,' said Lætitia.

'You are Constancy.'

'No.' She coloured. 'I am "in with the rest." I do not say I should have done the same. But I have the knowledge that I must not sit in judgement on her. I can waver.'

She coloured again. She was anxious that he should know her to be not that stupid statue of Constancy in a corner doating on the antic Deception. Reminiscences of the interview overnight made it oppressive to her to hear herself praised for always pointing like the needle. Her newly enfranchised individuality pressed to assert its existence. Vernon, however, not seeing this novelty, continued, to her excessive discomfort, to baste her old abandoned image with his praises. They checked hers;

and moreover he had suddenly conceived an envy of her life-long, uncomplaining, almost unaspiring, constancy of sentiment. If you know lovers when they have not reason to be blissful, you will remember that in this mood of admiring envy they are given to fits of uncontrollable maundering. Praise of constancy, moreover, smote shadowily a certain inconstant, enough to seem to ruffle her smoothness and do no hurt. He found his consolation in it, and poor Lætitia writhed. Without designing to retort, she instinctively grasped at a weapon of defence in further exalting his devotedness ; which reduced him to cast his head to the heavens and implore them to partially enlighten her. Nevertheless, maunder he must ; and he recurred to it in a way so utterly unlike himself that Lætitia stared in his face. She wondered whether there could be anything secreted behind this everlasting theme of constancy. He took her awakened gaze for a summons to asseverations of sincerity, and out they came. She would have fled from him, but to think of flying was to think how little it was that urged her to fly, and yet the thought of remaining and listening to praises undeserved and no longer flattering, was a torture.

‘ Mr. Whitford, I bear no comparison with you.’

‘ I do and must set you for my example, Miss Dale.’

‘ Indeed you do wrongly ; you do not know me.’

‘ I could say that. For years . . . !’

‘ Pray, Mr. Whitford !’

‘ Well, I have admired it. You show us how self can be smothered.’

‘ An echo would be a retort on you !’

‘ On me ? I am never thinking of anything else.’

‘ I could say that.’

‘ You are necessarily conscious of not swerving.’

‘ But I do ; I waver dreadfully ; I am not the same two days running.’

‘ You are the same, with “ ravishing divisions ” upon the same.’

‘ And you without the “ divisions.” I draw such support as I have from you.’

‘ From some simulacrum of me, then. And that will show you how little you require support.’

‘ I do not speak my own opinion only.’

‘ Whose ? ’

‘ I am not alone.’

‘ Again let me say, I wish I were like you ! ’

‘ Then let me add, I would willingly make the exchange ! ’

‘ You would be amazed at your bargain.’

‘ Others would be ! ’

‘ Your exchange would give me the qualities I am in want of, Miss Dale.’

‘ Negative, passive, at the best, Mr. Whitford. But I should have . . .’

‘ Oh !—pardon me. But you inflict the sensations of a boy, with a dose of honesty in him, called up to receive a prize he has won by the dexterous use of a crib.’

‘ And how do you suppose she feels, who has a crown of Queen o’ the May forced on her head when she is verging on November ? ’

He rejected her analogy, and she his. They could neither of them bring to light the circumstances which made one another’s admiration so unbearable. The more he exalted her for constancy, the more did her mind become bent upon critically examining the object of that imagined virtue ; and the more she praised him for possessing the spirit of perfect friendliness, the fiercer grew the passion in him which disdained the imputation, hissing like a heated iron-bar that flings the water-drops to steam. He would none of it : would rather have stood exposed in his profound foolishness.

Amiable though they were, and mutually affectionate, they came to a stop in their walk, longing to separate, and not seeing how it was to be done, they had so knit themselves together with the pelting of their interlaudation.

‘ I think it is time for me to run home to my father for an hour,’ said Lætitia.

‘ I ought to be working,’ said Vernon.

Good progress was made to the disgarlanding of themselves thus far ; yet, an acutely civilized pair, the abruptness of the transition from floweriness to commonplace affected them both, Lætitia chiefly, as she had broken the pause, and she remarked,

‘ I am really Constancy in my opinions.’

‘ Another title is customary where stiff opinions are concerned. Perhaps by-and-by you will learn your mistake, and then you will acknowledge the name for it.’

‘ How ? ’ said she. ‘ What shall I learn ? ’

‘ If you learn that I am a grisly Egoist ? ’

‘ You ? And it would not be egoism,’ added Lætitia, revealing to him at the same instant as to herself, that she swung suspended on a scarce credible guess.

‘ —Will nothing pierce your ears, Mr. Whitford ? ’

He heard the intruding voice, but he was bent on rubbing out the cloudy letters Lætitia had begun to spell, and he stammered in a tone of matter-of-fact : ‘ Just that and no better ’ ; then turned to Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson.

‘ —Or are you resolved you will never see Professor Crooklyn when you look on him ? ’ said the great lady.

Vernon bowed to the Professor and apologized to him shufflingly and rapidly, incoherently, and with a red face ; which induced Mrs. Mountstuart to scan Lætitia’s.

After lecturing Vernon for his abandonment of her yesterday evening, and flouting his protestations, she returned to the business of the day. ‘ We walked from the

lodge-gates to see the park and prepare ourselves for Dr. Middleton. We parted last night in the middle of a controversy and are rageing to resume it. Where is our redoubtable antagonist ?'

Mrs. Mountstuart wheeled Professor Crooklyn round to accompany Vernon.

'We,' she said, 'are for modern English scholarship, opposed to the champion of German.'

'The contrary,' observed Professor Crooklyn.

'Oh. We,' she corrected the error serenely, 'are for German scholarship, opposed to English.'

'Certain editions.'

'We defend certain editions.'

'Defend, is a term of imperfect application to my position, ma'am.'

'My dear Professor, you have in Dr. Middleton a match for you in conscientious pugnacity, and you will not waste it upon me. There, there they are ; there he is. Mr. Whitford will conduct you. I stand away from the first shock.'

Mrs. Mountstuart fell back to Lætitia, saying : 'He pores over a little inexactitude in phrases, and pecks at it like a domestic fowl.'

Professor Crooklyn's attitude and air were so well described that Lætitia could have laughed.

'These mighty scholars have their flavour,' the great lady hastened to add, lest her younger companion should be misled to suppose that they were not valuable to a governing hostess : 'their shadow-fights are ridiculous, but they have their flavour at a table. Last night, no : I discard all mention of last night. We failed : as none else in this neighbourhood could fail, but we failed. If we have among us a cormorant devouring young lady who drinks up all the—ha !—brandy and water—of our inns and occupies all our flies, why, our condition is abnormal,

and we must expect to fail : we are deprived of accommodation for accidental circumstances. How Mr. Whitford could have missed seeing Professor Crooklyn ! And what was *he* doing at the station, Miss Dale ? ’

‘ Your portrait of Professor Crooklyn was too striking, Mrs. Mountstuart, and deceived him by its excellence. He appears to have seen only the blank side of the slate.’

‘ Ah. He is a faithful friend of his cousin, do you not think ? ’

‘ He is the truest of friends.’

‘ As for Dr. Middleton,’ Mrs. Mountstuart diverged from her inquiry, ‘ he will swell the letters of my vocabulary to gigantic proportions if I see much of him : he is contagious.’

‘ I believe it is a form of his humour.’

‘ I caught it of him yesterday at my dinner-table in my distress, and must pass it off as a form of mine, while it lasts. I talked Dr. Middleton half the dreary night through to my pillow. Your candid opinion, my dear, come ! As for me, I don’t hesitate. We seemed to have sat down to a solitary performance on the bass-viol. We were positively an assembly of insects during thunder. My very soul thanked Colonel De Craye for his diversions, but I heard nothing but Dr. Middleton. It struck me that my table was petrified, and every one sat listening to bowls played overhead.’

‘ I was amused.’

‘ Really ? You delight me. Who knows but that my guests were sincere in their congratulations on a thoroughly successful evening ? I have fallen to this, you see ! And I know, wretched people ! that as often as not it is their way of condoling with one. I do it myself : but only where there have been amiable efforts. But imagine *my* being congratulated for that !—Good morning, Sir Willoughby.—The worst offender ! and I am in

no pleasant mood with him,' Mrs. Mountstuart said aside to Lætitia, who drew back, retiring.

Sir Willoughby came on a step or two. He stopped to watch Lætitia's figure swimming to the house.

So, as, for instance, beside a stream, when a flower on the surface extends its petals drowning to subside in the clear still water, we exercise our privilege to be absent in the charmed contemplation of a beautiful natural incident.

A smile of pleased abstraction melted on his features.

CHAPTER XXXIV

MRS. MOUNTSTUART AND SIR WILLOUGHBY

'GOOD-MORNING, my dear Mrs. Mountstuart,' Sir Willoughby wakened himself to address the great lady.

'Why has she fled?'

'Has any one fled?'

'Lætitia Dale.'

'Letty Dale? Oh! if you call that flying. Possibly to renew a close conversation with Vernon Whitford, that I cut short. You frightened me with your "Shepherds-tell-me" air and tone. Lead me to one of your garden-seats: out of hearing to Dr. Middleton, I beg. He mesmerizes me, he makes me talk Latin. I was curiously susceptible last night. I know I shall everlastingly associate him with an abortive entertainment and solos on big instruments. We were flat.'

'Horace was in good vein.'

'You were not.'

'And Lætitia—Miss Dale talked well, I thought.'

'She talked with you, and no doubt she talked well.'

We did not mix. The yeast was bad. You shot darts at Colonel De Craye : you tried to sting. You brought Dr. Middleton down on you. Dear me, that man is a reverberation in my head. Where is your lady and love ? ’

‘ Who ? ’

‘ Am I to name her ? ’

‘ Clara ? I have not seen her for the last hour. Wandering, I suppose.’

‘ A very pretty summer-bower,’ said Mrs. Mountstuart, seating herself. ‘ Well, my dear Sir Willoughby, preferences, preferences are not to be accounted for, and one never knows whether to pity or congratulate, whatever may occur. I want to see Miss Middleton.’

‘ Your “ dainty rogue in porcelain ” will be at your beck—you lunch with us ?—before you leave.’

‘ So now you have taken to quoting me, have you ? ’

‘ But, “ a romantic tale on her eyelashes,” is hardly descriptive any longer.’

‘ Descriptive of whom ? Now you are upon Lætitia Dale ! ’

‘ I quote you generally. She has now a graver look.’

‘ And well may have ! ’

‘ Not that the romance has entirely disappeared.’

‘ No : it looks as if it were in print.’

‘ You have hit it perfectly, as usual, ma’am.’

Sir Willoughby mused.

Like one resuming his instrument to take up the melody in a concerted piece, he said : ‘ I thought Lætitia Dale had a singularly animated air last night.’

‘ Why—— ! ’ Mrs. Mountstuart mildly gaped.

‘ I want a new description of her. You know, I collect your mottoes and sentences.’

‘ It seems to me she is coming three parts out of her shell, and wearing it as a hood for convenience.’

‘ Ready to issue forth at an invitation ? Admirable ! exact ! ’

‘Ay, my good Sir Willoughby, but are we so very admirable and exact? Are we never to know our own minds?’

He produced a polysyllabic sigh, like those many-jointed compounds of poets in happy languages, which are copious in a single expression: ‘Mine is known to me. It always has been. Cleverness in women is not uncommon. Intellect is the pearl. A woman of intellect is as good as a Greek statue; she is divinely wrought, and she is divinely rare.’

‘Proceed,’ said the lady, confiding a cough to the air.

‘The rarity of it:—and it is not mere intellect, it is a sympathetic intellect; or else it is an intellect in perfect accord with an intensely sympathetic disposition;—the rarity of it makes it too precious to be parted with when once we have met it. I prize it the more the older I grow.’

‘Are we on the feminine or the neuter?’

‘I beg pardon?’

‘The universal or the individual?’

He shrugged. ‘For the rest, psychological affinities may exist coincident with and entirely independent of material or moral prepossessions, relations, engagements, ties.’

‘Well, that is not the raving of passion, certainly,’ said Mrs. Mountstuart, ‘and it sounds as if it were a comfortable doctrine for men. On that plea, you might all of you be having Aspasia and a wife. We saw your fair Middleton and Colonel De Craye at a distance as we entered the park. Professor Crooklyn is under some hallucination.’

‘What more likely?’

The readiness and the double-bearing of the reply struck her comic sense with awe.

‘The Professor must hear that. He insists on the fly,

and the inn, and the wet boots, and the warming mixture, and the testimony of the landlady and the railway porter.'

'I say, what more likely?'

'Than that he should insist?'

'If he is under the hallucination!'

'He may convince others.'

'I have only to repeat . . . !'

'"What more likely?" It's extremely philosophical. Coincident with a pursuit of the psychological affinities.'

'Professor Crooklyn will hardly descend, I suppose, from his classical altitudes to lay his hallucinations before Dr. Middleton?'

'Sir Willoughby, you are the pink of chivalry!'

By harping on Lætitia, he had emboldened Mrs. Mountstuart to lift the curtain upon Clara. It was offensive to him, but the injury done to his pride had to be endured for the sake of his general plan of self-protection.

'Simply desirous to save my guests from annoyance of any kind,' he said. 'Dr. Middleton can look "Olympus and thunder," as Vernon calls it.'

'Don't. I see him. That look! It is Dictionary-bitten! Angry, horned Dictionary!—an apparition of Dictionary in the night—to a dunce!'

'One would undergo a good deal to avoid the sight.'

'What the man must be in a storm! Speak as you please of yourself: you are a true and chivalrous knight to dread it for her. But now candidly, how is it you cannot condescend to a little management? Listen to an old friend. You are too lordly. No lover can afford to be incomprehensible for half an hour. Stoop a little. Sermonizings are not to be thought of. You can govern unseen. You are to know that I am one who disbelieves in philosophy in love. I admire the look of it, I give no credit to the assumption. I rather like lovers to be out at times: it makes them picturesque, and it enlivens

their monotony. I perceived she had a spot of wildness. It 's proper that she should wear it off before marriage.'

'Clara ? The wildness of an infant ! ' said Willoughby, paternally musing over an inward shiver. ' You saw her at a distance just now, or you might have heard her laughing. Horace diverts her excessively.'

' I owe him my eternal gratitude for his behaviour last night. She was one of my bright faces. Her laughter was delicious ; rain in the desert ! It will tell you what the load on me was, when I assure you those two were merely a spectacle to me—points I scored in a lost game. And I know they were witty.'

' They both have wit ; a kind of wit,' Willoughby assented.

' They struck together like a pair of cymbals.'

' Not the highest description of instrument. However, they amuse me. I like to hear them when I am in the vein.'

' That vein should be more at command with you, my friend. You can be perfect, if you like.'

' Under your tuition.'

Willoughby leaned to her, bowing languidly. He was easier in his pain for having hoodwinked the lady. She was the outer world to him : she could tune the world's voice ; prescribe which of the two was to be pitied, himself or Clara ; and he did not intend it to be himself, if it came to the worst.

They were far away from that at present, and he continued : ' Probably a man's power of putting on a face is not equal to a girl's. I detest petty dissensions. Probably I show it when all is not quite smooth. Little fits of suspicion vex me. It is a weakness, not to play them off, I know. Men have to learn the arts which come to women by nature. I don't sympathize with suspicion, from having none myself.'

His eyebrows shot up. That ill-omened man Flitch had sidled round by the bushes to within a few feet of him.

Flitch primarily defended himself against the accusation of drunkenness, which was hurled at him to account for his audacity in trespassing against the interdict : but he admitted that he had taken 'something short' for a fortification in visiting scenes where he had once been happy—at Christmastide, when all the servants, and the butler at head, gray old Mr. Chessington, sat in rows, toasting the young heir of the old Hall in the old port wine ! Happy had he been then, before ambition for a shop, to be his own master and an independent gentleman, had led him into his quagmire :—to look back envying a dog on the old estate, and sigh for the smell of Patterne stables : sweeter than Arabia, his drooping nose appeared to say.

He held up close against it something that imposed silence on Sir Willoughby as effectually as a cunning exordium in oratory will enchain mobs to swallow what is not complimenting them : and this he displayed, secure in its being his license to drivel his abominable pathos. Sir Willoughby recognized Clara's purse. He understood at once how the man must have come by it : he was not so quick in devising a means of stopping the tale. Flitch foiled him. 'Intact,' he replied to the question : 'What have you there ?' He repeated this grand word. And then he turned to Mrs. Mountstuart to speak of Paradise and Adam, in whom he saw the prototype of himself : also the Hebrew people in the bondage of Egypt, discoursed of by the clergymen, not without a likeness to him.

'Sorrows have done me one good, to send me attentive to church, my lady,' said Flitch, 'when I might have gone to London, the coachman's home, and been driving

some honourable family, with no great advantage to my morals, according to what I hear of. And a purse found under the seat of a fly in London would have a poor chance of returning *intact* to the young lady losing it.'

'Put it down on that chair; inquiries will be made, and you will see Sir Willoughby,' said Mrs. Mountstuart. 'Intact, no doubt; it is not disputed.'

With one motion of a finger she set the man rounding. Flitch halted: he was very regretful of the termination of his feast of pathos, and he wished to relate the finding of the purse, but he could not encounter Mrs. Mountstuart's look: he slouched away in very close resemblance to the ejected Adam of illustrated books.

'It's my belief that naturalness among the common people has died out of the kingdom,' she said.

Willoughby charitably apologized for him. 'He has been fuddling himself.'

Her vigilant considerateness had dealt the sensitive gentleman a shock, plainly telling him she had her ideas of his actual posture. Nor was he unhurt by her superior acuteness and her display of authority on his grounds.

He said boldly, as he weighed the purse, half tossing it: 'It's not unlike Clara's.'

He feared that his lips and cheeks were twitching, and as he grew aware of a glassiness of aspect that would reflect any suspicion of a keen-eyed woman, he became bolder still: 'Lætitia's, I know it is not. Hers is an ancient purse.'

'A present from you!'

'How do you hit on that, my dear lady?'

'Deductively.'

'Well, the purse looks as good as new in quality, like the owner.'

'The poor dear has not much occasion for using it.'

'You are mistaken: she uses it daily.'

‘If it were better filled, Sir Willoughby, your old scheme might be arranged. The parties do not appear so unwilling. Professor Crooklyn and I came on them just now rather by surprise, and I assure you their heads were close, faces meeting, eyes musing.’

‘Impossible.’

‘Because when they approach the point, you won’t allow it! Selfish!’

‘Now,’ said Willoughby, very animatedly, ‘question Clara. Now, do, my dear Mrs. Mountstuart, do speak to Clara on that head; she will convince you I have striven quite recently :—against myself, if you like. I have instructed her to aid me, given her the fullest instructions, *carte blanche*. *She* cannot possibly have a doubt. I may look to her to remove any you may entertain from your mind on the subject. I have proposed, seconded and chorussed it, and it will *not* be arranged. If you expect me to deplore that fact, I can only answer that my actions are under my control, my feelings are not. I will do everything consistent with the duties of a man of honour—perpetually running into fatal errors because he did not properly consult the dictates of those feelings at the right season. I can violate them : but I can no more command them than I can my destiny. They were crushed of old, and so let them be now. Sentiments, we won’t discuss; though you know that sentiments have a bearing on social life : are factors, as they say in their later jargon. I never speak of mine. To you I could. It is not necessary. If old Vernon, instead of flattening his chest at a desk had any manly ambition to take part in public affairs, she would be the woman for him. I have called her my Egeria. She would be his Cornelia. One could swear of her that she would have noble offspring!—But old Vernon has had his disappointment, and will moan over it up to the end. And she? So it

appears. I have tried ; yes, personally : without effect. In other matters I may have influence with her : not in that one. She declines. She will live and die Lætitia Dale. We are alone : I confess to you, I love the name. It 's an old song in my ears. Do not be too ready with a name for *me*. Believe me—I speak from my experience hitherto—there is a fatality in these things. I cannot conceal from my poor girl that this fatality exists . . .’

‘ Which is the poor girl at present ? ’ said Mrs. Mountstuart, cool in a mystification.

‘ And though she will tell you that I have authorized and—Clara Middleton—done as much as man can to institute the union you suggest, she will own that she is conscious of the presence of this—fatality, I call it for want of a better title—between us. It drives her in one direction, me in another—or would, if I submitted to the pressure. She is not the first who has been conscious of it.’

‘ Are we laying hold of a third poor girl ? ’ said Mrs. Mountstuart. ‘ Ah ! I remember. And I remember we used to call it playing fast and loose in those days, not fatality. It is very strange. It may be that you were unblushingly courted in those days, and excuseable : and we all supposed . . . but away you went for your tour.’

‘ My mother’s medical receipt for me. Partially it succeeded. She was for grand marriages : not I. I could make, I could not be, a sacrifice. And then I went in due time to Dr. Cupid on my own account. She has the kind of attraction . . . But one changes ! *On revient toujours*. First we begin with a liking : then we give ourselves up to the passion for beauty : then comes the serious question of suitableness of the mate to match us : and perhaps we discover that we were wiser in early youth than somewhat later. However, she has beauty. Now, Mrs. Mountstuart, you do admire her. Chase the

idea of the "dainty rogue" out of your view of her : you admire her : she is captivating ; she has a particular charm of her own, nay, she has real beauty.'

Mrs. Mountstuart fronted him to say : ' Upon my word, my dear Sir Willoughby, I think she has it to such a degree that I don't know the man who could hold out against her if she took the field. She is one of the women who are dead shots with men. Whether it's in their tongues or their eyes, or it's an effusion and an atmosphere—whatever it is, it's a spell, another fatality for you ! '

' Animal ; not spiritual ! '

' Oh ! she hasn't the head of Letty Dale.'

Sir Willoughby allowed Mrs. Mountstuart to pause and follow her thoughts.

' Dear me ! ' she exclaimed. ' I noticed a change in Letty Dale last night : and to-day. She looked fresher and younger ; extremely well : which is not what I can say for you, my friend. Fatalizing is not good for the complexion.'

' Don't take away my health, pray ! ' cried Willoughby, with a snapping laugh.

' Be careful,' said Mrs. Mountstuart. ' You have got a sentimental tone. You talk of "feelings crushed of old." It is to a woman, not to a man that you speak, but that sort of talk is a way of making the ground slippery. I listen in vain for a natural tongue ; and when I don't hear it, I suspect plotting in men. You show your under-teeth too at times when you draw in a breath, like a condemned high-caste Hindoo my husband took me to see in a jail in Calcutta, to give me some excitement when I was pining for England. The creature did it regularly as he breathed ; you did it last night, and you have been doing it to-day, as if the air cut you to the quick. You have been spoilt. You have been

too much anointed. What I 've just mentioned is a sign with me of a settled something on the brain of a man.'

'The brain?' said Sir Willoughby, frowning.

'Yes, you laugh sourly, to look at,' said she. 'Mountstuart told me that the muscles of the mouth betray men sooner than the eyes, when they have cause to be uneasy in their minds.'

'But, ma'am, I shall not break my word; I shall not, not; I intend, I have resolved to keep it. I do *not* fatalize, let my complexion be black or white. Despite my resemblance to a high-class malefactor of the Calcutta prison-wards . . .'

'Friend! friend! you know how I chatter.'

He saluted her finger-ends. 'Despite the extraordinary display of teeth, you will find me go to execution with perfect calmness; with a resignation as good as happiness.'

'Like a Jacobite lord under the Georges.'

'You have told me that you wept to read of one: like him, then. My principles have not changed, if I have. When I was younger, I had an idea of a wife who would be with me in my thoughts as well as aims: a woman with a spirit of romance, and a brain of solid sense. I shall sooner or later dedicate myself to a public life; and shall, I suppose, want the counsellor or comforter who ought always to be found at home. It may be unfortunate that I have the ideal in my head. But I would never make rigorous demands for specific qualities. The cruellest thing in the world is to set up a living model before a wife, and compel her to copy it. In any case, here we are upon the road: the die is cast. I shall not reprieve myself. I cannot release her. Marriage represents facts, courtship fancies. She will be cured by-and-by of that coveting of everything that I do, feel, think, dream, imagine . . . ta-ta-ta-ta ad infinitum.'

Lætitia was invited here to show her the example of a fixed character—solid as any concrete substance you would choose to build on, and not a whit the less feminine.’

‘Ta-ta-ta-ta ad infinitum. You need not tell me you have a design in all that you do, Willoughby Patterne.’

‘You smell the autocrat? Yes, he can mould and govern the creatures about him. His toughest rebel is himself! If you see Clara . . . You wish to see her, I think you said?’

‘Her behaviour to Lady Busshe last night was queer.’

‘If you will. She makes a mouth at porcelain. *Toujours la porcelaine!* For me, her pettishness is one of her charms, I confess it. Ten years younger, I could not have compared them.’

‘Whom?’

‘Lætitia and Clara.’

‘Sir Willoughby, in any case, to quote you, here we are all upon the road, and we must act as if events were going to happen; and I must ask her to help me on the subject of my wedding-present, for I don’t want to have her making mouths at mine, however pretty—and she does it prettily.’

‘“Another dedicatory offering to the *rogue* in me!” she says of porcelain.’

‘Then porcelain it shall not be. I mean to consult her; I have come determined upon a chat with her. I think I understand. But she produces false impressions on those who don’t know you both. “I shall have that porcelain back,” says Lady Busshe to me, when we were shaking hands last night: “I think,” says she, “it should have been the Willow Pattern.” And she really said: “he’s in for being jilted a second time!”’

Sir Willoughby restrained a bound of his body that would have sent him up some feet into the air. He felt his skull thundered at within.

‘Rather than that it should fall upon her!’ ejaculated he, correcting his resemblance to the high-caste culprit as soon as it recurred to him.

‘But you know Lady Busshe,’ said Mrs. Mountstuart, genuinely solicitous to ease the proud man of his pain. She could see through him to the depth of the skin, which his fencing sensitiveness vainly attempted to cover as it did the heart of him. ‘Lady Busshe is nothing without her flights, fads, and fancies. She has always insisted that you have an unfortunate nose. I remember her saying on the day of your majority, it was the nose of a monarch destined to lose a throne.’

‘Have I ever offended Lady Busshe?’

‘She trumpets you. She carries Lady Culmer with her too, and you may expect a visit of nods and hints and pots of alabaster. They worship you : you are the hope of England in their eyes, and no woman is worthy of you : but they are a pair of fatalists, and if you begin upon Letty Dale with them, you might as well forbid your banns. They will be all over the country exclaiming on predestination and marriages made in heaven.’

‘Clara and her father!’ cried Sir Willoughby.

Dr. Middleton and his daughter appeared in the circle of shrubs and flowers.

‘Bring her to me, and save me from the polyglot,’ said Mrs. Mountstuart, in affright at Dr. Middleton’s manner of pouring forth into the ears of the downcast girl.

The leisure he loved that he might debate with his genius upon any next step was denied to Willoughby : he had to place his trust in the skill with which he had sown and prepared Mrs. Mountstuart’s understanding to meet

the girl—beautiful abhorred that she was ! detested darling ! thing to squeeze to death and throw to the dust, and mourn over !

He had to risk it ; and at an hour when Lady Busshe's prognostic grievously impressed his intensely apprehensive nature.

As it happened that Dr. Middleton's notion of a disagreeable duty in colloquy was to deliver all that he contained, and escape the listening to a syllable of reply, Willoughby withdrew his daughter from him opportunely.

' Mrs. Mountstuart wants you, Clara.'

' I shall be very happy,' Clara replied, and put on a new face.

An imperceptible nervous shrinking was met by another force in her bosom, that pushed her to advance without a sign of reluctance. She seemed to glitter.

She was handed to Mrs. Mountstuart.

Dr. Middleton laid his hand over Willoughby's shoulder, retiring on a bow before the great lady of the district. He blew and said : ' An opposition of female instincts to masculine intellect necessarily creates a corresponding antagonism of intellect to instinct.'

' Her answer, sir ? Her reasons ? Has she named any ?'

' The cat,' said Dr. Middleton, taking breath for a sentence, ' that humps her back in the figure of the letter H, or a Chinese bridge, has given the dog her answer and her reasons, we may presume : but he that undertakes to translate them into human speech might likewise venture to propose an addition to the alphabet and a continuation of Homer. The one performance would be not more wonderful than the other. Daughters, Willoughby, daughters ! Above most human peccancies, I do abhor a breach of faith. She will not be guilty of that. I demand a cheerful fulfilment of a pledge : and I sigh to

think that I cannot count on it without administering a lecture.'

'She will soon be my care, sir.'

'She shall be. Why, she is as good as married. She is at the altar. She is in her house. She is—why, where is she not? She has entered the sanctuary. She is out of the market. This mænad shriek for freedom would happily entitle her to the Republican cap—the Phrygian—in a revolutionary Parisian procession. To me it has no meaning: and but that I cannot credit child of mine with mania, I should be in trepidation of her wits.'

Sir Willoughby's livelier fears were pacified by the information that Clara had simply emitted a cry. Clara had once or twice given him cause for starting and considering whether to think of her sex differently or condemningly of her, yet he could not deem her capable of fully unbosoming herself even to him, and under excitement. His idea of the cowardice of girls combined with his ideal of a waxwork sex to persuade him that though they are often (he had experienced it) wantonly desperate in their acts, their tongues are curbed by rosy pudency. And this was in his favour. For if she proved speechless and stupid with Mrs. Mountstuart, the lady would turn her over, and beat her flat, beat her angular, in fine, turn her to any shape, despising her, and cordially believe him to be the model gentleman of Christendom. She would fill in the outlines he had sketched to her of a picture that he had small pride in by comparison with his early vision of a fortune-favoured, triumphing squire, whose career is like the sun's, intelligibly lordly to all comprehensions. Not like your model gentleman, that has to be expounded—a thing for abstract esteem! However, it was the choice left to him. And an alternative was enfolded in that. Mrs. Mountstuart's model gentleman could marry either one of two women, throwing

the other overboard. He was bound to marry : he was bound to take to himself one of them : and whichever one he selected would cast a lustre on his reputation. At least she would rescue him from the claws of Lady Busshe, and her owl's hoot of 'Willow Pattern,' and her hag's shriek of 'twice jilted.' That flying infant Willoughby—his unprotected little incorporeal omnipresent Self (not thought of so much as passionately felt for)—would not be scoffed at as the luckless with women. A fall indeed from his original conception of his name of fame abroad ! But Willoughby had the high consolation of knowing that others have fallen lower. There is the fate of the devils to comfort us, if we are driven hard. *For one of your pangs another bosom is racked by ten*, we read in the solacing Book.

With all these nice calculations at work, Willoughby stood above himself, contemplating his active machinery, which he could partly criticize but could not stop, in a singular wonderment at the aims and schemes and tremours of one who was handsome, manly, acceptable in the world's eyes : and had he not loved himself most heartily he would have been divided to the extent of repudiating that urgent and excited half of his being, whose motions appeared as those of a body of insects perpetually erecting and repairing a structure of extraordinary pettiness. He loved himself too seriously to dwell on the division for more than a minute or so. But having seen it, and for the first time, as he believed, his passion for the woman causing it became surcharged with bitterness, atrabiliar.

A glance behind him, as he walked away with Dr. Middleton, showed Clara, cunning creature that she was, airily executing her malicious graces in the preliminary courtesies with Mrs. Mountstuart.

CHAPTER XXXV

MISS MIDDLETON AND MRS. MOUNTSTUART

‘SIT beside me, fair Middleton,’ said the great lady.

‘Gladly,’ said Clara, bowing to her title.

‘I want to sound you, my dear.’

Clara presented an open countenance with a dim interrogation on the forehead. ‘Yes?’ she said submissively.

‘You were one of my bright faces last night. I was in love with you. Delicate vessels ring sweetly to a fingernail, and if the wit is true, you answer to it; that I can see, and that is what I like. Most of the people one has at a table are drums. A rub-a-dub-dub on them is the only way to get a sound. When they can be persuaded to do it upon one another, they call it conversation.’

‘Colonel De Craye was very funny.’

‘Funny, and witty too.’

‘But never spiteful.’

‘These Irish or half-Irishmen are my taste. If they’re not politicians, mind: I mean Irish gentlemen. I will never have another dinner-party without one. Our men’s tempers are uncertain. You can’t get them to forget themselves. And when the wine is in them the nature comes out, and they must be buffeting, and up start politics, and good-bye to harmony! My husband, I am sorry to say, was one of those who have a long account of ruined dinners against them. I have seen him and his friends red as the roast and white as the boiled with wrath on a popular topic they had excited themselves over, intrinsically not worth a snap of the fingers. In London!’ exclaimed Mrs. Mountstuart, to aggravate the charge against her lord in the Shades. ‘But town or country,

the table should be sacred. I have heard women say it is a plot on the side of the men to teach us our littleness. I don't believe they have a plot. It would be to compliment them on a talent. I believe they fall upon one another blindly, simply because they are full : which is, we are told, the preparation for the fighting Englishman. They cannot eat and keep a truce. Did you notice that dreadful Mr. Capes ? '

' The gentleman who frequently contradicted papa ? But Colonel De Craye was good enough to relieve us.'

' How, my dear ? '

' You did not hear him ? He took advantage of an interval when Mr. Capes was breathing after a pæan to his friend, the Governor—I think—of one of the Presidencies, to say to the lady beside him : " He was a wonderful administrator and great logician ; he married an Anglo-Indian widow, and soon after published a pamphlet in favour of Suttee." '

' And what did the lady say ? '

' She said, " Oh." '

' Hark at her ! And was it heard ? '

' Mr. Capes granted the widow, but declared he had never seen the pamphlet in favour of Suttee, and disbelieved in it. He insisted that it was to be named Satl. He was vehement.'

' Now I do remember :—which must have delighted the colonel. And Mr. Capes retired from the front upon a repetition of " in toto, in toto." As if " in toto " were the language of a dinner-table ! But what will ever teach these men ? Must we import Frenchmen to give them an example in the art of conversation, as their grandfathers brought over marquises to instruct them in salads ? And our young men too ! Women have to take to the hunting-field to be able to talk with them and be on a par with their grooms. Now, there was Willoughby Patterne, a

prince among them formerly. Now, did you observe him last night ? did you notice how, instead of conversing, instead of assisting me—as he was bound to do doubly, owing to the defection of Vernon Whitford : a thing I don't yet comprehend—there he sat sharpening his lower lip for cutting remarks. And at my best man ! at Colonel De Craye ! If he had attacked Mr. Capes, with his Governor of Bomby, as the man pronounces it, or Colonel Wildjohn and his Protestant Church in Danger, or Sir Wilson Pettifer harping on his Monarchical Republic, or any other ! No, he preferred to be sarcastic upon friend Horace, and he had the worst of it. Sarcasm is so silly ! What is the gain if he has been smart ? People forget the epigram and remember the other's good temper. On that field, my dear, you must make up your mind to be beaten by "friend Horace." I have my prejudices and I have my prepossessions, but I love good temper, and I love wit, and when I see a man possessed of both, I set my cap at him, and there's my flat confession, and highly unfeminine it is.'

'Not at all !' cried Clara.

'We are one, then.'

Clara put up a mouth empty of words : she was quite one with her. Mrs. Mountstuart pressed her hand. 'When one does get intimate with a dainty rogue !' she said. 'You forgive me all that, for I could vow that Willoughby has betrayed me.'

Clara looked soft, kind, bright, in turns, and clouded instantly when the lady resumed : 'A friend of my own sex, and young, and a close neighbour, is just what I would have prayed for. And I'll excuse you, my dear, for not being so anxious about the friendship of an old woman. But I shall be of use to you, you will find. In the first place, I never tap for secrets. In the second, I keep them. Thirdly, I have some power. And fourth, every young

married woman has need of a friend like me. Yes, and Lady Patterne heading all the county will be the stronger for my backing. You don't look so mighty well pleased, my dear. Speak out.'

'Dear Mrs. Mountstuart !'

'I tell you, I am very fond of Willoughby, but I saw the faults of the boy and see the man's. He has the pride of a king, and it's a pity if you offend it. He is prodigal in generosity, but he can't forgive. As to his own errors, you must be blind to them as a Saint. The secret of him is, that he is one of those excessively civilized creatures who aim at perfection : and I think he ought to be supported in his conceit of having attained it ; for the more men of that class, the greater our influence. He excels in manly sports, because he won't be excelled in anything, but as men don't comprehend his fineness, he comes to us ; and his wife must manage him by that key. You look down at the idea of managing. It has to be done. One thing you may be assured of, he will be proud of you. His wife won't be very much enamoured of herself if she is not the happiest woman in the world. You will have the best horses, the best dresses, the finest jewels, in England ; and an incomparable cook. The house will be changed the moment you enter it as Lady Patterne. And, my dear, just where he is, with all his graces, deficient of attraction, yours will tell. The sort of Othello he would make, or Leontes, I don't know, and none of us ever needs to know. My impression is, that if even a shadow of a suspicion flitted across him, he is a sort of man to double-dye himself in guilt by way of vengeance in anticipation of an imagined offence. Not uncommon with men. I have heard strange stories of them : and so will you in your time to come, but not from me. No young woman shall ever be the sourer for having been my friend. One word of advice now we are on the topic : never play at counter-

strokes with him. He will be certain to outstroke you, and you will be driven farther than you meant to go. They say we beat men at that game, and so we do, at the cost of beating ourselves. And if once we are started, it is a race-course ending on a precipice—over goes the winner. We must be moderately slavish to keep our place; which is given us in appearance; but appearances make up a remarkably large part of life, and far the most comfortable, so long as we are discreet at the right moment. He is a man whose pride, when hurt, would run his wife to perdition to solace it. If he married a troublesome widow, his pamphlet on Suttee would be out within the year. Vernon Whitford would receive instructions about it the first frosty moon. You like Miss Dale?’

‘I think I like her better than she likes me,’ said Clara.

‘Have you never warmed together?’

‘I have tried it. She is not one bit to blame. I can see how it is that she misunderstands me: or justly condemns me, perhaps I should say.’

‘The hero of two women must die and be wept over in common before they can appreciate one another. You are not cold?’

‘No.’

‘You shuddered, my dear.’

‘Did I?’

‘I do sometimes. Feet will be walking over one’s grave, wherever it lies. Be sure of this: Willoughby Patterne is a man of unimpeachable honour.’

‘I do not doubt it.’

‘He means to be devoted to you. He has been accustomed to have women hanging around him like votive offerings.’

‘I . . . !’

‘You cannot: of course not: any one could see that at

a glance. You are all the sweeter to me for not being tame. Marriage cures a multitude of indispositions.'

'Oh! Mrs. Mountstuart, will you listen to me?'

'Presently. Don't threaten me with confidences. Eloquence is a terrible thing in woman. I suspect, my dear, that we both know as much as could be spoken.'

'You hardly suspect the truth, I fear.'

'Let me tell you one thing about jealous men—when they are not blackamoors married to disobedient daughters. I speak of our civil creature of the drawing-rooms: and lovers, mind, not husbands: two distinct species, married or not:—they're rarely given to jealousy unless they are flighty themselves. The jealousy fixes them. They have only to imagine that we are for some fun likewise and they grow as deferential as my footman, as harmless as the sportsman whose gun has burst. Ah! my fair Middleton, am I pretending to teach you? You have read him his lesson, and my table suffered for it last night, but I bear no rancour.'

'You bewilder me, Mrs. Mountstuart.'

'Not if I tell you that you have driven the poor man to try whether it would be possible for him to give you up.'

'I have?'

'Well, and you are successful.'

'I am?'

'Jump, my dear!'

'He will?'

'When men love stale instead of fresh, withered better than blooming, excellence in the abstract rather than the palpable. With their idle prate of feminine intellect, and a grotto nymph, and, and a mother of Gracchi! Why, he must think me dazed with admiration of him to talk to me! One listens, you know. And he is one of the men who cast a kind of physical spell on you while he has you by the ear, until you begin to think of it by talking to

somebody else. I suppose there are clever people who do see deep into the breast while dialogue is in progress. One reads of them. No, my dear, you have very cleverly managed to show him that it isn't at all possible : he can't. And the real cause for alarm in my humble opinion is lest your amiable foil should have been a trifle, as he would say, deceived, too much in earnest, led too far. One may reprove him for not being wiser, but men won't learn without groaning, that they are simply weapons taken up to be put down when done with. Leave it to me to compose him.—Willoughby can't give you up. I'm certain he has tried ; his pride has been horribly wounded. You are shrewd, and he has had his lesson. If these little rufflings don't come before marriage they come after ; so it's not time lost ; and it's good to be able to look back on them. You are very white, my child.'

'Can you, Mrs. Mountstuart, can you think I would be so heartlessly treacherous ?'

'Be honest, fair Middleton, and answer me : Can you say you had not a corner of an idea of producing an effect on Willoughby ?'

Clara checked the instinct of her tongue to defend her reddening cheeks, with a sense that she was disintegrating and crumbling ; but she wanted this lady for a friend, and she had to submit to the conditions, and be red and silent.

Mrs. Mountstuart examined her leisurely.

'That will do. Conscience blushes. One knows it by the outer conflagration. Don't be hard on yourself : there you are in the other extreme. That blush of yours would count with me against any quantity of evidence—all the Crooklyns in the kingdom. You lost your purse.'

'I discovered that it was lost this morning.'

'Flitch has been here with it. Willoughby has it. You will ask him for it ; he will demand payment : you will be a couple of yards' length or so of cramoisy : and

there ends the episode, nobody killed, only a poor man melancholy-wounded, and I must offer him my hand to mend him, vowing to prove to him that Suttee was properly abolished. Well, and now to business. I said I wanted to sound you. You have been overdone with porcelain. Poor Lady Busshe is in despair at your disappointment. Now, I mean my wedding-present to be to your taste.'

'Madam !'

'Who is the madam you are imploring ?'

'Dear Mrs. Mountstuart !'

'Well ?'

'I shall fall in your esteem. Perhaps you will help me. No one else can. I am a prisoner : I am compelled to continue this imposture. Oh ! I shun speaking much : you object to it and I dislike it : but I must endeavour to explain to you that I am unworthy of the position you think a proud one.'

'Tut-tut ; we are all unworthy, cross our arms, bow our heads ; and accept the honours. Are you playing humble handmaid ? What an old organ-tune that is ! Well ? Give me reasons.'

'I do not wish to marry.'

'He 's the great match of the county !'

'I cannot marry him.'

'Why, you are at the church-door with him ! Cannot marry him ?'

'It does not bind me.'

'The church-door is as binding as the altar to an honourable girl. What have you been about ? Since I am in for confidences, half ones won't do. We must have honourable young women as well as men of honour. You can't imagine he is to be thrown over now, at this hour ? What have you against him ? come !'

'I have found that I do not . . .'

‘What?’

‘Love him.’

Mrs. Mountstuart grimaced transiently. ‘That is no answer. The cause!’ she said. ‘What has he done?’

‘Nothing.’

‘And when did you discover this nothing?’

‘By degrees: unknown to myself; suddenly.’

‘Suddenly and by degrees? I suppose it’s useless to ask for a head. But if all this is true, you ought not to be here.’

‘I wish to go; I am unable.’

‘Have you had a scene together?’

‘I have expressed my wish.’

‘In roundabout?—girl’s English?’

‘Quite clearly. Oh! very clearly.’

‘Have you spoken to your father?’

‘I have.’

‘And what does Dr. Middleton say?’

‘It is incredible to him.’

‘To me too! I can understand little differences, little whims, caprices: we don’t settle into harness for a tap on the shoulder, as a man becomes a knight: but to break and bounce away from an unhappy gentleman at the church-door is either madness or it’s one of the things without a name. You think you are quite sure of yourself?’

‘I am so sure, that I look back with regret on the time when I was not.’

‘But you were in love with him.’

‘I was mistaken.’

‘No love?’

‘I have none to give.’

‘Dear me!—Yes, yes, but that tone of sorrowful conviction is often a trick, it’s not new: and I know that assumption of plain sense to pass off a monstrosity.’ Mrs.

Mountstuart struck her lap : ‘Soh ! but I’ve had to rack my brain for it : feminine disgust ? You have been hearing imputations on his past life ? moral character ? No ? Circumstances might make him behave unkindly, not unhandsomely : and we have no claim over a man’s past, or it’s too late to assert it. What is the case ?’

‘We are quite divided.’

‘Nothing in the way of . . . nothing green-eyed ?’

‘Far from that !’

‘Then, name it.’

‘We disagree.’

‘Many a very good agreement is founded on disagreeing. It’s to be regretted that you are not portionless. If you had been, you would have made very little of disagreeing. You are just as much bound in honour as if you had the ring on your finger.’

‘In honour ! But I appeal to his, I am no wife for him.’

‘But if he insists, you consent !’

‘I appeal to reason. Is it, madam . . .’

‘But, I say, if he insists, you consent !’

‘He will insist upon his own misery as well as mine.’

Mrs. Mountstuart rocked herself. ‘My poor Sir Wilmoughby ! What a fate !—And I who took you for a clever girl ! Why, I have been admiring your management of him ! And here am I bound to take a lesson from Lady Busshe. My dear good Middleton, don’t let it be said that Lady Busshe saw deeper than I ! I put some little vanity in it, I own : I won’t conceal it. She declares that when she sent her present—I don’t believe her—she had a premonition that it would come back. Surely you won’t justify the extravagances of a woman without common reverence :—for anatomize him as we please to ourselves, he is a splendid man (and I did it chiefly to encourage and come at you). We don’t often behold such a lordly-looking man : so conversable too when he

feels at home ; a picture of an English gentleman ! The very man we want married for our neighbourhood ! A woman who can openly talk of expecting him to be twice jilted ! You shrink. It is repulsive. It would be incomprehensible : except, of course, to Lady Busshe, who rushed to one of her violent conclusions and became a prophetess. Conceive a woman imagining it could happen twice to the same man ! I am not sure she did not send the identical present that arrived and returned once before : you know, the Durham engagement. She told me last night she had it back. I watched her listening very suspiciously to Professor Crooklyn. My dear, it is her passion to foretell disasters—her passion ! And when they are confirmed, she triumphs, of course. We shall have her domineering over us with sapient nods at every trifle occurring. The county will be unendurable. Unsay it, my Middleton ! And don't answer like an oracle because I do all the talking. Pour out to me. You 'll soon come to a stop and find the want of reason in the want of words. I assure you that 's true.—Let me have a good gaze at you. No,' said Mrs. Mountstuart, after posturing herself to peruse Clara's features, ' brains you have : one can see it by the nose and the mouth. I could vow you are the girl I thought you ; you have your wits on tiptoe. How of the heart ? '

' None,' Clara sighed.

The sigh was partly voluntary, though unforced ; as one may with ready sincerity act a character that is our own only through sympathy.

Mrs. Mountstuart felt the extra-weight in the young lady's falling breath. There was no necessity for a deep sigh over an absence of heart or confession of it. If Clara did not love the man to whom she was betrothed, sighing about it signified—what ? some pretence : and a pretence is the cloak of a secret. Girls do not sigh in that

way with compassion for the man they have no heart for, unless at the same time they should be oppressed by the knowledge or dread of having a heart for some one else. As a rule, they have no compassion to bestow on him : you might as reasonably expect a soldier to bewail the enemy he strikes in action : they must be very disengaged to have it. And supposing a show of the thing to be exhibited, when it has not been worried out of them, there is a reserve in the background : they are pitying themselves under a mask of decent pity of their wretch.

So ran Mrs. Mountstuart's calculations, which were like her suspicion, coarse and broad, not absolutely incorrect, but not of an exact measure with the truth. That pin's head of the truth is rarely hit by design. The search after it of the professionally penetrative in the dark of a bosom may bring it forth by the heavy knocking all about the neighbourhood that we call good guessing, but it does not come out clean ; other matter adheres to it ; and being more it is less than truth. The unadulterate is to be had only by faith in it or by waiting for it.

A lover ! thought the sagacious dame. There was no lover : some love there was : or rather, there was a preparation of the chamber, with no lamp yet lighted.

'Do you positively tell me you have no heart for the position of first lady of the county ?' said Mrs. Mountstuart.

Clara's reply was firm : 'None whatever.'

'My dear, I will believe you on one condition.—Look at me. You have eyes. If you are for mischief, you are armed for it. But how much better, when you have won a prize, to settle down and wear it ! Lady Patterne will have entire occupation for her flights and whimsies in leading the county. And the man, surely the man—he behaved badly last night : but a beauty like this,' she pushed a finger at Clara's cheek, and doated a half instant,

'you have the very beauty to break in an ogre's temper. And the man is as governable as he is presentable. You have the beauty the French call—no, it's the beauty of a queen of elves : one sees them lurking about you, one here, one there. Smile—they dance : be doleful—they hang themselves. No, there's not a trace of satanic ; at least, not yet. And come, come, my Middleton, the man is a man to be proud of. You can send him into Parliament to wear off his humours. To my thinking, he has a fine style : conscious ? I never thought so before last night. I can't guess what has happened to him recently. He was once a young Grand Monarque. He was really a superb young English gentleman. Have you been wounding him ?'

'It is my misfortune to be obliged to wound him,' said Clara.

'Quite needlessly, my child, for marry him you must.'

Clara's bosom rose : her shoulders rose too, narrowing, and her head fell slightly back.

Mrs. Mountstuart exclaimed : 'But the scandal ! You would never never think of following the example of that Durham girl ?—whether she was provoked to it by jealousy or not. It seems to have gone so astonishingly far with you in a very short time, that one is alarmed as to where you will stop. Your look just now was downright revulsion.'

'I fear it is. It is. I am past my own control. Dear madam, you have my assurance that I will not behave scandalously or dishonourably. What I would entreat of you, is to help me. I know this of myself : I am not the best of women. I am impatient, wickedly. I should be no good wife. Feelings like mine teach me unhappy things of myself.'

'Rich, handsome, lordly, influential, brilliant health, fine estates,' Mrs. Mountstuart enumerated in petulant

accents as they started across her mind some of Sir Willoughby's attributes for the attraction of the soul of woman. 'I suppose you wish me to take you in earnest?'

'I appeal to you for help.'

'What help?'

'Persuade him of the folly of pressing me to keep my word.'

'I will believe you, my dear Middleton, on one condition:—your talk of no heart is nonsense. A change like this, if one is to believe in the change, occurs through the heart, not because there is none. Don't you see that? But if you want me for a friend, you must not sham stupid. It's bad enough in itself: the imitation's horrid. You have to be honest with me, and answer me right out. You came here on this visit intending to marry Willoughby Patterne.'

'Yes.'

'And *gradually* you *suddenly* discovered, since you came here, that you did not intend it, if you could find a means of avoiding it.'

'Oh! madam, yes, it is true.'

'Now comes the test. And, my lovely Middleton, your flaming cheeks won't suffice for me this time. The old serpent can blush like an innocent maid on occasion. You are to speak, and you are to tell me in six words why that was: and don't waste one on "madam," or "Oh! Mrs. Mountstuart." Why did you change?'

'I came . . . when I came I was in some doubt. Indeed I speak the truth. I found I could not give him the admiration he has, I dare say, a right to expect. I turned—it surprised me: it surprises me now. But so completely! So that to think of marrying him is . . .'

'Defer the simile,' Mrs. Mountstuart interposed. 'If you hit on a clever one, you will never get the better of it. Now, by just as much as you have outstripped my

limitation of words to you, you show me you are dishonest.'

'I could make a vow.'

'You would forswear yourself.'

'Will you help me ?'

'If you are perfectly ingenuous, I may try.'

'Dear lady, what more can I say ?'

'It may be difficult. You can reply to a catechism.'

'I shall have your help ?'

'Well, yes ; though I don't like stipulations between friends. There is no man living to whom you could willingly give your hand ? That is my question. I cannot possibly take a step unless I know. Reply briefly : there is or there is not.'

Clara sat back with bated breath, mentally taking the leap into the abyss, realizing it, and the cold prudence of abstention, and the delirium of the confession. Was there such a man ? It resembled freedom to think there was : to avow it promised freedom.

'Oh ! Mrs. Mountstuart.'

'Well ?'

'You will help me ?'

'Upon my word, I shall begin to doubt your desire for it.'

'*Willingly* give my hand, madam ?'

'For shame ! And with wits like yours, can't you perceive where hesitation in answering such a question lands you ?'

'Dearest lady, will you give me your hand ? may I whisper ?'

'You need not whisper : I won't look.'

Clara's voice trembled on a tense chord.

'There is one . . . compared with him I feel my insignificance. If I could aid him.'

'What necessity have you to tell me more than that there is one ?'

‘ Ah, madam, it is different : not as you imagine. You bid me be scrupulously truthful : I am : I wish you to know the different kind of feeling it is from what might be suspected from . . . a confession. To give my hand, is beyond any thought I have ever encouraged. If you had asked me whether there is one whom I admire—yes, I do. I cannot help admiring a beautiful and brave self-denying nature. It is one whom you must pity, and to pity casts you beneath him : for you pity him because it is his nobleness that has been the enemy of his fortunes. He lives for others.’

Her voice was musically thrilling in that low muted tone of the very heart, impossible to deride or disbelieve.

Mrs. Mountstuart set her head nodding on springs.

‘ Is he clever ? ’

‘ Very.’

‘ He talks well ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘ Handsome ? ’

‘ He might be thought so.’

‘ Witty ? ’

‘ I think he is.’

‘ Gay, cheerful ? ’

‘ In his manner.’

‘ Why, the man would be a mountebank if he adopted any other. And poor ? ’

‘ He is not wealthy.’

Mrs. Mountstuart preserved a lengthened silence, but nipped Clara’s fingers once or twice to reassure her without approving. ‘ Of course he’s poor,’ she said at last ; ‘ directly the reverse of what you *could* have, it *must* be. Well, my fair Middleton, I can’t say you have been dishonest. I’ll help you as far as I’m able. How, it is quite impossible to tell. We’re in the mire. The best way seems to me, to get this pitiable angel to cut some

ridiculous capers and present you another view of him. I don't believe in his innocence. He knew you to be a plighted woman.'

'He has not once by word or sign hinted a disloyalty.'

'Then how do you know . . . ?'

'I do not know.'

'He is not the cause of your wish to break your engagement ?'

'No.'

'Then you have succeeded in just telling me nothing. What is ?'

'Ah ! madam.'

'You would break your engagement purely because the admirable creature is in existence ?'

Clara shook her head : she could not say : she was dizzy. She had spoken out more than she had ever spoken to herself : and in doing so she had cast herself a step beyond the line she dared to contemplate.

'I won't detain you any longer,' said Mrs. Mountstuart. 'The more we learn, the more we are taught that we are not so wise as we thought we were. I have to go to school to Lady Busshe ! I really took you for a very clever girl. If you change again, you will notify the important circumstance to me, I trust.'

'I will,' said Clara, and no violent declaration of the impossibility of her changing again would have had such an effect on her hearer.

Mrs. Mountstuart scanned her face for a new reading of it to match with her later impressions.

'I am to do as I please with the knowledge I have gained ?'

'I am utterly in your hands, madam.'

'I have not meant to be unkind.'

'You have not been unkind ; I could embrace you.'

'I am rather too shattered, and kissing won't put me

together. I laughed at Lady Busshe ! No wonder you went off like a rocket with a disappointing bouquet when I told you you had been successful with poor Sir Willoughby and he could not give you up. I noticed that. A woman like Lady Busshe, always prying for the lamentable, would have required no further enlightenment. Has he a temper ? ’

Clara did not ask her to signalize the person thus abruptly obtruded.

‘ He has faults,’ she said.

‘ There ’s an end to Sir Willoughby, then ! Though I don’t say he will give you up even when he hears the worst, if he must hear it, as for his own sake he should. And I won’t say he ought to give you up. He ’ll be the pitiable angel if he does. For you—but you don’t deserve compliments ; they would be immoral. You have behaved badly, badly, badly. I have never had such a right-about-face in my life. You will deserve the stigma : you will be notorious : you will be called Number Two. Think of that ! Not even original ! We will break the conference, or I shall twaddle to extinction. I think I heard the luncheon-bell.’

‘ It rang.’

‘ You don’t look fit for company, but you had better come.’

‘ Oh ! yes : every day it ’s the same.’

‘ Whether you ’re in my hands or I ’m in yours, we ’re a couple of arch-conspirators against the peace of the family whose table we ’re sitting at, and the more we rattle the viler we are, but we must do it to ease our minds.’

Mrs. Mountstuart spread the skirts of her voluminous dress, remarking further : ‘ At a certain age our teachers are young people : we learn by looking backward. It speaks highly for me that I have not called you mad.—Full of faults, goodish-looking, not a bad talker, cheerful,

poorish ;—and she prefers that to this ! ’ the great lady exclaimed in her reverie while emerging from the circle of shrubs upon a view of the Hall.

Colonel De Craye advanced to her ; certainly good-looking, certainly cheerful, by no means a bad talker, nothing of a Croesus, and variegated with faults.

His laughing smile attacked the irresolute hostility of her mien, confident as the sparkle of sunlight in a breeze. The effect of it on herself angered her on behalf of Sir Willoughby’s bride.

‘ Good morning, Mrs. Mountstuart ; I believe I am the last to greet you. ’

‘ And how long do you remain here, Colonel De Craye ? ’

‘ I kissed earth when I arrived, like the Norman William, and consequently I ’ve an attachment to the soil, ma’am. ’

‘ You are not going to take possession of it, I suppose ? ’

‘ A handful would satisfy me ! ’

‘ You play the Conqueror pretty much, I have heard. But property is held more sacred than in the times of the Norman William. ’

‘ And speaking of property, Miss Middleton, your purse is found, ’ he said.

‘ I know it is, ’ she replied, as unaffectedly as Mrs. Mountstuart could have desired, though the ingenuous air of the girl incensed her somewhat.

Clara passed on.

‘ You restore purses, ’ observed Mrs. Mountstuart.

Her stress on the word, and her look, thrilled De Craye : for there had been a long conversation between the young lady and the dame.

‘ It was an article that dropped and was not stolen, ’ said he.

‘ Barely sweet enough to keep, then ! ’

‘ I think I could have felt to it like poor Flitch, the flyman, who was the finder.’

‘ If you are conscious of these temptations to appropriate what is not your own, you should quit the neighbourhood.’

‘ And do it elsewhere ? But that’s not virtuous counsel.’

‘ And I’m not counselling in the interests of your virtue, Colonel De Craye.’

‘ And I dared for a moment to hope that you were, ma’am,’ he said, ruefully drooping.

They were close to the dining-room window, and Mrs. Mountstuart preferred the terminating of a dialogue that did not promise to leave her features the austere iron cast with which she had commenced it. She was under the spell of gratitude for his behaviour yesterday evening at her dinner-table ; she could not be very severe.

CHAPTER XXXVI

ANIMATED CONVERSATION AT A LUNCHEON-TABLE

VERNON was crossing the hall to the dining-room as Mrs. Mountstuart stepped in. She called to him : ‘ Are the champions reconciled ? ’

He replied : ‘ Hardly that, but they have consented to meet at an altar to offer up a victim to the Gods, in the shape of modern poetic imitations of the classical.’

‘ That seems innocent enough. The Professor has not been anxious about his chest ? ’

‘ He recollects his cough now and then.’

‘ You must help him to forget it.’

‘ Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer are here,’ said Vernon,

not supposing it to be a grave announcement until the effect of it on Mrs. Mountstuart admonished him.

She dropped her voice : ' Engage my fair friend for one of your walks the moment we rise from table. You may have to rescue her ; but do. I mean it.'

' She 's a capital walker,' Vernon remarked in simpleton style.

' There 's no necessity for any of your pedestrian feats,' Mrs. Mountstuart said, and let him go, turning to Colonel De Craye to pronounce an encomium on him : ' The most open-minded man I know ! Warranted to do perpetual service and no mischief. If you were all . . . instead of catching at every prize you covet ! Yes, you would have your reward for unselfishness, I assure you. Yes, and where you seek it ! That is what none of you men will believe.'

' When you behold me in your own livery ! ' cried the colonel.

' Do I ? ' said she, dallying with a half-formed design to be confidential. ' How is it one is always tempted to address you in the language of innuendo ? I can't guess.'

' Except that as a dog doesn't comprehend good English we naturally talk bad to him.'

The great lady was tickled. Who could help being amused by this man ? And after all, if her fair Middleton chose to be a fool, there could be no gainsaying her, sorry though poor Sir Willoughby's friends must feel for him.

She tried not to smile.

' You are too absurd. Or a baby, you might have added.'

' I hadn't the daring.'

' I'll tell you what, Colonel De Craye, I shall end by falling in love with you ; and without esteeming you, I fear.'

' The second follows as surely as the flavour upon a

draught of Bacchus, if you'll but toss off the glass, ma'am.'

'We women, sir, think it should be first.'

'Tis to transpose the seasons, and give October the blossom, and April the apple, and no sweet one ! Esteem 's a mellow thing that comes after bloom and fire, like an evening at home ; because if it went before it would have no father and couldn't hope for progeny ; for there 'd be no nature in the business. So please, ma'am, keep to the original order, and you 'll be nature's child and I the most blest of mankind.'

'Really, were I fifteen years younger. I am not so certain . . . I might try and make you harmless.'

'Draw the teeth of the lamb so long as you pet him !'

'I challenged you, colonel, and I won't complain of your pitch. But now lay your wit down beside your candour and descend to an every-day level with me for a minute.'

'Is it innuendo ?'

'No, though I dare say it would be easier for you to respond to, if it were.'

'I'm the straightforwardest of men at a word of command.'

'This is a whisper. Be alert as you were last night. Shuffle the table well. A little liveliness will do it. I don't imagine malice, but there 's curiosity, which is often as bad, and not so lightly foiled. We have Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer here.'

'To sweep the cobwebs out of the sky !'

'Well, then, can you fence with broomsticks ?'

'I have had a bout with them in my time.'

'They are terribly direct.'

'They "give point," as Napoleon commanded his cavalry to do.'

'You must help me to ward it.'

‘ They will require variety in the conversation.’

‘ Constant. You are an angel of intelligence, and if I have the judging of you, I ’m afraid you ’ll be allowed to pass, in spite of the scandal above. Open the door ; I don’t unbonnet.’

De Craye threw the door open.

Lady Busshe was at that moment saying : ‘ And are we indeed to have you for a neighbour, Dr. Middleton ? ’

The Rev. Doctor’s reply was drowned by the new arrivals.

‘ I thought you had forsaken us,’ observed Sir Willoughby to Mrs. Mountstuart.

‘ And run away with Colonel De Craye ? I ’m too weighty, my dear friend. Besides, I have not looked at the wedding-presents yet.’

‘ The very object of our call ! ’ exclaimed Lady Culmer.

‘ I have to confess I am in dire alarm about mine,’ Lady Busshe nodded across the table at Clara. ‘ Oh ! you may shake your head, but I would rather hear a rough truth than the most complimentary evasion.’

‘ How would you define a rough truth, Dr. Middleton ? ’ said Mrs. Mountstuart.

Like the trained warrior who is ready at all hours for the trumpet to arms, Dr. Middleton wakened up for judicial allocution in a trice.

‘ A rough truth, madam, I should define to be that description of truth which is not imparted to mankind without a powerful impregnation of the roughness of the teller.’

‘ It is a rough truth, ma’am, that the world is composed of fools, and that the exceptions are knaves,’ Professor Crooklyn furnished the example avoided by the Rev. Doctor.

‘ Not to precipitate myself into the jaws of the first definition, which strikes me as being as happy as Jonah’s

whale, that could carry probably the most learned man of his time inside without the necessity of digesting him,' said De Craye, 'a rough truth is a rather strong charge of universal nature for the firing off of a modicum of personal fact.'

'It is a rough truth that Plato is Moses atticizing,' said Vernon to Dr. Middleton, to keep the diversion alive.

'And that Aristotle had the globe under his cranium,' rejoined the Rev. Doctor.

'And that the Moderns live on the Ancients.'

'And that not one in ten thousand can refer to the particular treasury he filches.'

'The Art of our days is a revel of rough truth,' remarked Professor Crooklyn.

'And the literature has laboriously mastered the adjective, wherever it may be in relation to the noun,' Dr. Middleton added.

'Orson's first appearance at Court was in the figure of a rough truth, causing the Maids of Honour, accustomed to Tapestry Adams, astonishment and terror,' said De Craye.

That he might not be left out of the sprightly play, Sir Willoughby levelled a lance at the quintain, smiling on Lætitia: 'In fine, caricature is rough truth.'

She said: 'Is one end of it, and realistic directness is the other.'

He bowed: 'The palm is yours.'

Mrs. Mountstuart admired herself as each one trotted forth in turn characteristically, with one exception unaware of the aid which was being rendered to a distressed damsel wretchedly incapable of decent hypocrisy. Her intrepid lead had shown her hand to the colonel and drawn the enemy at a blow.

Sir Willoughby's 'in fine,' however, did not please her: still less did his lackadaisical Lothario-like bowing and

smiling to Miss Dale : and he perceived it and was hurt. For how, carrying his tremendous load, was he to compete with these unhandicapped men in the game of nonsense she had such a fondness for starting at a table ? He was further annoyed to hear Miss Eleanor and Miss Isabel Patterne agree together, that ‘ caricature ’ was the final word of the definition. Relatives should know better than to deliver these awards to us in public.

‘ Well ! ’ quoth Lady Busshe, expressive of stupefaction at the strange dust she had raised.

‘ Are they on view, Miss Middleton ? ’ inquired Lady Culmer.

‘ There ’s a regiment of us on view and ready for inspection,’ Colonel De Craye bowed to her, but she would not be foiled. ‘ Miss Middleton’s admirers are always on view,’ said he.

‘ Are they to be seen ? ’ said Lady Busshe.

Clara made her face a question, with a laudable smoothness.

‘ The wedding-presents,’ Lady Culmer explained.

‘ No.’

‘ Otherwise, my dear, we are in danger of duplicating and triplicating and quadruplicating, not at all to the satisfaction of the bride.’

‘ But there ’s a worse danger to encounter in the “ on view,” my lady,’ said De Craye ; ‘ and that ’s the magnetic attraction a display of wedding-presents is sure to have for the ineffable burglar, who must have a nuptial soul in him, for wherever there ’s that collection on view, he ’s never a league off. And ’tis said he knows a lady’s dressing-case presented to her on the occasion, fifteen years after the event.’

‘ As many as fifteen ? ’ said Mrs. Mountstuart.

‘ By computation of the police. And if the presents are on view, dogs are of no use, nor bolts, nor bars :—he ’s

worse than Cupid. The only protection to be found, singular as it may be thought, is in a couple of bottles of the oldest Jamaica rum in the British Isles.'

'Rum?' cried Lady Busshe.

'The liquor of the Royal Navy, my lady. And with your permission, I'll relate the tale in proof of it. I had a friend engaged to a young lady, niece of an old sea-captain of the old school, the Benbow school, the wooden leg and pigtail school; a perfectly salt old gentleman with a pickled tongue, and a dash of brine in every deed he committed. He looked rolled over to you by the last wave on the shore, sparkling: he was Neptune's own for humour. And when his present to the bride was opened, sure enough there lay a couple of bottles of the oldest Jamaica rum in the British Isles, born before himself, and his father to boot. 'Tis a fabulous spirit I beg you to believe in, my lady, the sole merit of the story being its portentous veracity. The bottles were tied to make them appear twins, as they both had the same claim to seniority. And there was a label on them, telling their great age, to maintain their identity. They were in truth a pair of patriarchal bottles rivalling many of the biggest houses in the kingdom for antiquity. They would have made the donkey that stood between the two bundles of hay look at them with obliquity: supposing him to have, for an animal, a rum taste, and a turn for hilarity. Wonderful old bottles! So, on the label, just over the date, was written large: **UNCLE BENJAMIN'S WEDDING-PRESENT TO HIS NIECE BESSY.** Poor Bessy shed tears of disappointment and indignation enough to float the old gentleman on his native element, ship and all. She vowed it was done curmudgeonly to vex her, because her uncle hated wedding-presents and had grunted at the exhibition of cups and saucers, and this and that beautiful service, and épergnes and inkstands, mirrors, knives and forks,

dressings-cases, and the whole mighty category. She protested, she flung herself about, she declared those two ugly bottles should not join the exhibition in the dining-room, where it was laid out for days, and the family ate their meals where they could, on the walls, like flies. But there was also Uncle Benjamin's legacy on view, in the distance, so it was ruled against her that the bottles should have their place. And one fine morning down came the family after a fearful row of the domestics ; shouting, screaming, cries for the police, and murder topping all. What did they see ? They saw two prodigious burglars extended along the floor, each with one of the twin bottles in his hand, and a remainder of the horror of the midnight hanging about his person like a blown fog, sufficient to frighten them whilst they kicked the rascals entirely intoxicated. Never was wilder disorder of wedding-presents, and not one lost !—owing, you 'll own, to Uncle Benjy's two bottles of ancient Jamaica rum.'

Colonel De Craye concluded with an asseveration of the truth of the story.

'A most provident far-sighted old sea-captain !' exclaimed Mrs. Mountstuart, laughing at Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer.

These ladies chimed in with her gingerly.

'And have you many more clever stories, Colonel De Craye ?' said Lady Busshe.

'Ah ! my lady, when the tree begins to count its gold 'tis nigh upon bankruptcy.'

'Poetic !' ejaculated Lady Culmer, spying at Miss Middleton's rippled countenance, and noting that she and Sir Willoughby had not interchanged word or look.

'But that in the case of your Patterne Port a bottle of it would outvalue the catalogue of nuptial presents,

Willoughby, I would recommend your stationing some such constabulary to keep watch and ward,' said Dr. Middleton as he filled his glass, taking Bordeaux in the middle of the day, under a consciousness of virtue and its reward to come at half-past seven in the evening.

'The dogs would require a dozen of that, sir,' said De Craye.

'Then it is not to be thought of. Indeed, one!' Dr. Middleton negatived the idea.

'We are no further advanced than when we began,' observed Lady Busshe.

'If we are marked to go by stages,' Mrs. Mountstuart assented.

'Why, then, we shall be called old coaches,' remarked the colonel.

'You,' said Lady Culmer, 'have the advantage of us in a closer acquaintance with Miss Middleton. You know her tastes, and how far they have been consulted in the little souvenirs already grouped somewhere, although not yet for inspection. I am at sea. And here is Lady Busshe in deadly alarm. There is plenty of time to effect a change—though we are drawing on rapidly to the fatal day, Miss Middleton. We are, we are very near it. Oh! yes. I am one who thinks that these little affairs should be spoken of openly, without that ridiculous bourgeois affectation, so that we may be sure of giving satisfaction. It is a transaction, like everything else in life. I for my part wish to be remembered favourably. I put it as a test of breeding to speak of these things as plain matter-of-fact. You marry; I wish you to have something by you to remind you of me. What shall it be?—useful or ornamental. For an ordinary household the choice is not difficult. But where wealth abounds we are in a dilemma.'

'And with persons of decided tastes,' added Lady

Busshe. 'I am really very unhappy,' she protested to Clara.

Sir Willoughby dropped Lætitia : Clara's look of a sedate resolution to preserve silence on the topic of the nuptial gifts, made a diversion imperative.

'Your porcelain was exquisitely chosen, and I profess to be a connoisseur,' he said. 'I am poor in old Saxony, as you know : I can match the county in Sèvres, and my inheritance of China will not easily be matched in the country.'

'You may consider your Dragon vases a present from young Crossjay,' said De Craye.

'How ?'

'Hasn't he abstained from breaking them ? the capital boy ! Porcelain and a boy in the house together, is a case of prospective disaster fully equal to Flitch and a fly.'

'You should understand that my friend Horace—whose wit is in this instance founded on another tale of a boy—brought us a magnificent piece of porcelain, destroyed by the capsizing of his conveyance from the station,' said Sir Willoughby to Lady Busshe.

She and Lady Culmer gave out lamentable Ohs, while Miss Eleanor and Miss Isabel Patterne sketched the incident. Then the lady visitors fixed their eyes in united sympathy upon Clara : recovering from which, after a contemplation of marble, Lady Busshe emphasized : 'No, you do not love porcelain, it is evident, Miss Middleton.'

'I am glad to be assured of it,' said Lady Culmer.

'Oh ! I know that face : I know that look,' Lady Busshe affected to remark rallyingly : 'it is not the first time I have seen it.'

Sir Willoughby smarted to his marrow. 'We will rout these fancies of an over-scrupulous generosity, my dear Lady Busshe.'

Her unwonted breach of delicacy in speaking publicly of her present, and the vulgar persistency of her sticking to the theme, very much perplexed him. And if he mistook her not, she had just alluded to the demoniacal Constantia Durham. It might be that he had mistaken her : he was on guard against his terrible sensitiveness. Nevertheless it was hard to account for this behaviour of a lady greatly his friend and admirer, a lady of birth. And Lady Culmer as well !—likewise a lady of birth. Were they in collusion ? had they a suspicion ? He turned to Lætitia's face for the antidote to his pain.

‘ Oh, but you are not one yet, and I shall require two voices to convince me,’ Lady Busshe rejoined after another stare at the marble.

‘ Lady Busshe, I beg you not to think me ungrateful,’ said Clara.

‘ Fiddle !—gratitude ! it is to please your taste, to satisfy *you*. I care for gratitude as little as for flattery.’

‘ But gratitude is flattering,’ said Vernon.

‘ Now, no metaphysics, Mr. Whitford.’

‘ But do care a bit for flattery, my lady,’ said De Craye. ‘ ’Tis the finest of the Arts ; we might call it moral sculpture. Adepts in it can cut their friends to any shape they like by practising it with the requisite skill. I myself, poor hand as I am, have made a man act Solomon by constantly praising his wisdom. He took a sagacious turn at an early period of the dose. He weighed the smallest question of his daily occasions with a deliberation truly oriental. Had I pushed it, he ’d have hired a baby and a couple of mothers to squabble over the undivided morsel.’

‘ I shall hope for a day in London with you,’ said Lady Culmer to Clara.

‘ You did not forget the Queen of Sheba ? ’ said Mrs. Mountstuart to De Craye.

‘With her appearance, the game has to be resigned to her entirely,’ he rejoined.

‘That is,’ Lady Culmer continued, ‘if you do not despise an old woman for your comrade on a shopping excursion.’

‘Despise whom we fleece!’ exclaimed Dr. Middleton. ‘Oh, no, Lady Culmer, the sheep is sacred.’

‘I am not so sure,’ said Vernon.

‘In what way, and to what extent, are you not so sure?’ said Dr. Middleton.

‘The natural tendency is to scorn the fleeced.’

‘I stand for the contrary. Pity, if you like: particularly when they bleat.’

‘This is to assume that makers of gifts are a fleeced people: I demur,’ said Mrs. Mountstuart.

‘Madam, we are expected to give; we are incited to give; you have dubbed it the fashion to give; and the person refusing to give, or incapable of giving, may anticipate that he will be regarded as benignly as a sheep of a drooping and flaccid wool by the farmer, who is reminded by the poor beast’s appearance of a strange dog that worried the flock. Even Captain Benjamin, as you have seen, was unable to withstand the demand on him. The hymenæal pair are licensed freebooters levying blackmail on us; survivors of an uncivilized period. But in taking without mercy, I venture to trust that the manners of a happier æra instruct them not to scorn us. I apprehend that Mr. Whitford has a lower order of latrons in his mind.’

‘Permit me to say, sir, that you have not considered the ignoble aspect of the fleeced,’ said Vernon. ‘I appeal to the ladies: would they not, if they beheld an ostrich walking down a Queen’s Drawing-Room, clean-plucked, despise him though they were wearing his plumes?’

‘An extreme supposition, indeed,’ said Dr. Middleton, frowning over it: ‘scarcely legitimately to be suggested.’

‘ I think it fair, sir, as an instance.’

‘ Has the circumstance occurred, I would ask ? ’

‘ In life ? a thousand times.’

‘ I fear so,’ said Mrs. Mountstuart.

Lady Busshe showed symptoms of a desire to leave a profitless table.

Vernon started up, glancing at the window.

‘ Did you see Crossjay ? ’ he said to Clara.

‘ No ; I must, if he is there,’ said she.

She made her way out, Vernon after her. They both had the excuse.

‘ Which way did the poor boy go ? ’ she asked him.

‘ I have not the slightest idea,’ he replied. ‘ But put on your bonnet, if you would escape that pair of inquisitors.’

‘ Mr. Whitford, what humiliation ! ’

‘ I suspect you do not feel it the most, and the end of it can’t be remote,’ said he.

Thus it happened that when Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer quitted the dining-room, Miss Middleton had spirited herself away from summoning voice and messenger.

Sir Willoughby apologized for her absence. ‘ If I could be jealous, it would be of that boy Crossjay.’

‘ You are an excellent man, and the best of cousins,’ was Lady Busshe’s enigmatical answer.

The exceedingly lively conversation at his table was lauded by Lady Culmer.

‘ Though,’ said she, ‘ what it all meant, and what was the drift of it, I couldn’t tell to save my life. Is it every day the same with you here ? ’

‘ Very much.’

‘ How you must enjoy a spell of dulness ! ’

‘ If you said, simplicity and not talking for effect ! I generally cast anchor by Lætitia Dale.’

‘ Ah ! ’ Lady Busshe coughed. ‘ But the fact is, Mrs. Mountstuart is mad for cleverness.’

‘ I think, my lady, Lætitia Dale is to the full as clever as any of the stars Mrs. Mountstuart assembles, or I.’

‘ Talkative cleverness, I mean.’

‘ In conversation as well. Perhaps you have not yet given her a chance.’

‘ Yes, yes, she is clever, of course, poor dear. She is looking better too.’

‘ Handsome, I thought,’ said Lady Culmer.

‘ She varies,’ observed Sir Willoughby.

The ladies took seat in their carriage and fell at once into a close-bonnet colloquy. Not a single allusion had they made to the wedding-presents after leaving the luncheon-table. The cause of their visit was obvious.

CHAPTER XXXVII

CONTAINS CLEVER FENCING AND INTIMATIONS OF THE
NEED FOR IT

THAT woman, Lady Busshe, had predicted, after the event, Constantia Durham’s defection. She had also, subsequent to Willoughby’s departure on his travels, uttered sceptical things concerning his rooted attachment to Lætitia Dale. In her bitter vulgarity, that beaten rival of Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson for the leadership of the county had taken his nose for a melancholy prognostic of his fortunes ; she had recently played on his name : she had spoken the hideous English of his fate. Little as she knew, she was alive to the worst interpretation of appearances. No other eulogy occurred to her now than to call him the best of cousins, because Vernon Whitford

was housed and clothed and fed by him. She had nothing else to say for a man she thought luckless ! She was a woman barren of wit, stripped of style, but she was wealthy and a gossip—a forge of showering sparks—and she carried Lady Culmer with her. The two had driven from his house to spread the malignant rumour abroad : already they blew the biting world on his raw wound. Neither of them was like Mrs. Mountstuart, a witty woman, who could be hoodwinked ; they were dull women, who steadily kept on their own scent of the fact, and the only way to confound such inveterate forces was, to be ahead of them, and seize and transform the expected fact, and astonish them, when they came up to him, with a totally unanticipated fact.

‘ You see, you were in error, ladies.’

‘ And so we were, Sir Willoughby, and we acknowledge it. We never could have guessed *that* ! ’

Thus the phantom couple in the future delivered themselves, as well they might at the revelation. He could run far ahead.

Ay, but to combat these dolts, facts had to be encountered, deeds done, in groaning earnest. These representatives of the pig-sconces of the population judged by circumstances : airy shows and seems had no effect on them. Dexterity of fence was thrown away.

A flying peep at the remorseless might of dulness in compelling us to a concrete performance counter to our inclinations, if we would deceive its terrible instinct, gave Willoughby for a moment the survey of a sage. His intensity of personal feeling struck so vivid an illumination of mankind at intervals that he would have been individually wise, had he not been moved by the source of his accurate perceptions to a personal feeling of opposition to his own sagacity. He loathed and he despised the vision, so his mind had no benefit of it, though he

himself was whipped along. He chose rather (and the choice is open to us all) to be flattered by the distinction it revealed between himself and mankind.

But if he was not as others were, why was he discomfited, solicitous, miserable ? To think that it should be so, ran dead against his conqueror's theories wherein he had been trained, which, so long as he gained success awarded success to native merit, grandeur to the grand in soul, as light kindles light : nature presents the example. His early training, his bright beginning of life, had taught him to look to earth's principal fruits as his natural portion, and it was owing to a girl that he stood a mark for tongues, naked, wincing at the possible malignity of a pair of harridans. Why not whistle the girl away ?

Why, then he would be free to enjoy, careless, younger than his youth in the rebound to happiness !

And then would his nostrils begin to lift and sniff at the creeping up of a thick pestiferous vapour. Then in that volume of stench would he discern the sullen yellow eye of malice. A malarious earth would hunt him all over it. The breath of the world, the world's view of him, was partly his vital breath, his view of himself. The ancestry of the tortured man had bequeathed him this condition of high civilization among their other bequests. Your withered contracted Egoists of the hut and the grot reckon not of public opinion ; they crave but for liberty and leisure to scratch themselves and soothe an excessive scratch. Willoughby was expansive, a blooming one, born to look down upon a tributary world, and to exult in being looked to. Do we wonder at his consternation in the prospect of that world's blowing foul on him ? Princes have their obligations to teach them they are mortal, and the brilliant heir of a tributary world is equally enchained by the homage it brings him ;—more, inasmuch as it is immaterial, elusive, not gathered by the

tax, and he cannot capitally punish the treasonable recusants. Still must he be brilliant ; he must court his people. He must ever, both in his reputation and his person, aching though he be, show them a face and a leg.

The wounded gentleman shut himself up in his laboratory, where he could stride to and fro, and stretch out his arms for physical relief, secure from observation of his fantastical shapes, under the idea that he was meditating. There was perhaps enough to make him fancy it in the heavy fire of shots exchanged between his nerves and the situation ; there were notable flashes. He would not avow that he was in an agony : it was merely a desire for exercise.

Quintessence of worldliness, Mrs. Mountstuart appeared through his farthest window, swinging her skirts on a turn at the end of the lawn, with Horace De Craye smirking beside her. And the woman's vaunted penetration was unable to detect the histrionic Irishism of the fellow. Or she liked him for his acting and nonsense ; nor she only. The voluble beast was created to snare women. Willoughby became smitten with an adoration of steadfastness in women. The incarnation of that divine quality crossed his eyes. She was clad in beauty.

A horrible nondescript convulsion composed of yawn and groan drove him to his instruments, to avert a renewal of the shock ; and while arranging and fixing them for their unwonted task, he compared himself advantageously with men like Vernon and De Craye, and others of the county, his fellows in the hunting-field and on the Magistrate's bench, who neither understood nor cared for solid work, beneficial practical work, the work of Science.

He was obliged to relinquish it : his hand shook.

' Experiments will not advance much at this rate,' he said, casting the noxious retardation on his enemies.

It was not to be contested that he must speak with Mrs.

Mountstuart, however he might shrink from the trial of his facial muscles. Her not coming to him seemed ominous : nor was her behaviour at the luncheon-table quite obscure. She had evidently instigated the gentlemen to cross and counter-chatter Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer. For what purpose ?

Clara's features gave the answer.

They were implacable. And he could be the same.

In the solitude of his room he cried right out : ' I swear it, I will never yield her to Horace De Craye ! She shall feel some of my torments, and try to get the better of them by knowing she deserves them.' He had spoken it, and it was an oath upon the record.

Desire to do her intolerable hurt became an ecstasy in his veins, and produced another stretching fit, that terminated in a violent shake of the body and limbs ; during which he was a spectacle for Mrs. Mountstuart at one of the windows. He laughed as he went to her, saying : ' No, no work to-day ; it won't be done, positively refuses.'

' I am taking the Professor away,' said she ; ' he is fidgety about the cold he caught.'

Sir Willoughby stepped out to her. ' I was trying at a bit of work for an hour, not to be idle all day.'

' You work in that den of yours every day ? '

' Never less than an hour, if I can snatch it.'

' It is a wonderful resource ! '

The remark set him throbbing and thinking that a prolongation of his crisis exposed him to the approaches of some organic malady, possibly heart-disease.

' A habit,' he said. ' In there I throw off the world.'

' We shall see some results in due time.'

' I promise none : I like to be abreast of the real knowledge of my day, that is all.'

' And a pearl among country gentlemen ! '

‘ In your gracious consideration, my dear lady. Generally speaking, it would be more adviseable to become a chatterer and keep an anecdotal note-book. I could not do it, simply because I could not live with my own emptiness for the sake of making an occasional display of fireworks. I aim at solidity. It is a narrow aim, no doubt ; not much appreciated.’

‘ Lætitia Dale appreciates it.’

A smile of enforced ruefulness, like a leaf curling in heat, wrinkled his mouth.

Why did she not speak of her conversation with Clara ?

‘ Have they caught Crossjay ? ’ he said.

‘ Apparently they are giving chase to him.’

The likelihood was, that Clara had been overcome by timidity.

‘ Must you leave us ? ’

‘ I think it prudent to take Professor Crooklyn away.’

‘ He still . . . ? ’

‘ The extraordinary resemblance ! ’

‘ A word aside to Dr. Middleton will dispel that.’

‘ You are thoroughly good.’

This hateful encomium of commiseration transfixed him. Then, she knew of his calamity !

‘ Philosophical,’ he said, ‘ would be the proper term, I think.’

‘ Colonel De Craye, by the way, promises me a visit when he leaves you.’

‘ To-morrow ? ’

‘ The earlier the better. He is too captivating ; he is delightful. He won me in five minutes. I don’t accuse him. Nature gifted him to cast the spell. We are weak women, Sir Willoughby.’

She knew !

‘ Like to like : the witty to the witty, ma’am.’

‘ You won’t compliment me with a little bit of jealousy ? ’

‘ I forbear from complimenting *him*. ’

‘ Be philosophical, of course, if you have the philosophy. ’

‘ I pretend to it. Probably I suppose myself to succeed because I have no great requirement of it ; I cannot say. We are riddles to ourselves. ’

Mrs. Mountstuart pricked the turf with the point of her parasol. She looked down and she looked up.

‘ Well ? ’ said he to her eyes.

‘ Well, and where is Lætitia Dale ? ’

He turned about to show his face elsewhere.

When he fronted her again, she looked very fixedly, and set her head shaking.

‘ It will not do, my dear Sir Willoughby ! ’

‘ What ? ’

‘ It. ’

‘ I never could solve enigmas. ’

‘ Playing ta-ta-ta-ta ad infinitum, then. Things have gone far. All parties would be happier for an excursion. Send her home. ’

‘ Lætitia ? I can’t part with her. ’

Mrs. Mountstuart put a tooth on her under-lip as her head renewed its brushing negative.

‘ In what way can it be hurtful that she should be here, ma’am ? ’ he ventured to persist.

‘ Think. ’

‘ She is proof. ’

‘ Twice ! ’

The word was big artillery. He tried the affectation of a staring stupidity. She might have seen his heart thump, and he quitted the mask for an agreeable grimace.

‘ She is inaccessible. She is my friend. I guarantee

her, on my honour. Have no fear for her. I beg you to have confidence in me. I would perish rather. No soul on earth is to be compared with her.'

Mrs. Mountstuart repeated 'Twice!'

The low monosyllable, musically spoken in the same tone of warning of a gentle ghost, rolled a thunder that maddened him, but he dared not take it up to fight against it on plain terms.

'Is it for my sake?' he said.

'It will not do, Sir Willoughby!'

She spurred him to a frenzy.

'My dear Mrs. Mountstuart, you have been listening to tales. I am not a tyrant. I am one of the most easy-going of men. Let us preserve the forms due to society: I say no more. As for poor old Vernon, people call me a good sort of cousin; I should like to see him comfortably married; decently married this time. I have proposed to contribute to his establishment. I mention it to show that the case has been practically considered. He has had a tolerably souring experience of the state; he might be inclined if, say, you took him in hand, for another venture. It's a demoralizing lottery. However, Government sanctions it.'

'But, Sir Willoughby, what is the use of my taking him in hand, when, as you tell me, Lætitia Dale holds back?'

'She certainly does.'

'Then we are talking to no purpose, unless you undertake to melt her.'

He suffered a lurking smile to kindle to some strength of meaning.

'You are not over-considerate in committing me to such an office.'

'You are afraid of the danger?' she all but sneered.

Sharpened by her tone, he said: 'I have such a love of

steadfastness of character, that I should be a poor advocate in the endeavour to break it. And frankly, I know the danger. I saved my honour when I made the attempt : that is all I can say.'

'Upon my word,' Mrs. Mountstuart threw back her head to let her eyes behold him summarily over their fine aquiline bridge, 'you have the heart of mystification, my good friend.'

'Abandon the idea of Lætitia Dale.'

'And marry your cousin Vernon to whom ? Where are we ?'

'As I said, ma'am, I am an easy-going man. I really have not a spice of the tyrant in me. An intemperate creature held by the collar may have that notion of me, while pulling to be released as promptly as it entered the noose. But I do strictly and sternly object to the scandal of violent separations, open breaches of solemn engagements, a public rupture. Put it that I am the cause, I will not consent to a violation of decorum. Is that clear ? It is just possible for things to be arranged so that all parties may be happy in their way without much hubbub. Mind, it is not I who have willed it so. I am, and I am forced to be, passive. But I will not be obstructive.'

He paused, waving his hand to signify the vanity of the more that might be said.

Some conception of him, dashed by incredulity, excited the lady's intelligence.

'Well !' she exclaimed, 'you have planted me in the land of conjecture. As my husband used to say, I don't see light, but I think I see the lynx that does. We won't discuss it at present. I certainly must be a younger woman than I supposed, for I am learning hard.—Here comes the Professor, buttoned up to the ears, and Dr. Middleton flapping in the breeze. There will be a cough,

and a footnote referring to the young lady at the station, if we stand together, so please order my carriage.'

'You found Clara complacent? roguish?'

'I will call to-morrow. You have simplified my task, Sir Willoughby, very much: that is, assuming that I have not entirely mistaken you. I am so far in the dark, that I have to help myself by recollecting how Lady Busshe opposed my view of a certain matter formerly. Scepticism is her forte. It will be the very oddest thing if after all . . . ! No, I shall own, romance has not departed. Are you fond of dupes?'

'I detest the race.'

'An excellent answer. I could pardon you for it.' She refrained from adding: 'If you are making one of me.'

Sir Willoughby went to ring for her carriage.

She knew. That was palpable: Clara had betrayed him. 'The earlier Colonel De Craye leaves Patterne Hall the better': she had said that: and, 'all parties would be happier for an excursion.' She knew the position of things and she guessed the remainder. But what she did not know, and could not divine, was the man who fenced her. He speculated further on the witty and the dull. These latter are the redoubtable body. They will have facts to convince them; they had, he confessed it to himself, precipitated him into the novel sphere of his dark hints to Mrs. Mountstuart; from which the utter darkness might allow him to escape, yet it embraced him singularly, and even pleasantly, with the sense of a fact established.

It embraced him even very pleasantly. There was an end to his tortures. He sailed on a tranquil sea, the husband of a stedfast woman—no rogue. The exceeding beauty of stedfastness in women clothed Lætitia in graces Clara could not match. A tried stedfast

woman is the one jewel of the sex. She points to her husband like the sunflower ; her love illuminates him ; she lives in him, for him ; she testifies to his worth ; she drags the world to his feet ; she leads the chorus of his praises ; she justifies him in his own esteem ! Surely there is not on earth such beauty !

If we have to pass through anguish to discover it and cherish the peace it gives, to clasp it, calling it ours, is a full reward.

Deep in his reverie, he said his adieux to Mrs. Mount Stuart, and strolled up the avenue behind the carriage-wheels, unwilling to meet Lætitia till he had exhausted the fresh savour of the cud of fancy.

Supposing it done !—

It would be generous on his part. It would redound to his credit.

His home would be a fortress, impregnable to tongues. He would have divine security in his home.

One who read and knew and worshipped him would be sitting there starlike : sitting there, awaiting him, his fixed star.

It would be marriage with a mirror, with an echo ; marriage with a shining mirror, a choric echo.

It would be marriage with an intellect, with a fine understanding ; to make his home a fountain of repeatable wit : to make his dear old Patterne Hall the luminary of the county.

He revolved it as a chant : with anon and anon involuntarily a discordant animadversion on Lady Busshe. His attendant imps heard the angry inward cry.

Forthwith he set about painting Lætitia in delectable human colours, like a miniature of the past century, reserving her ideal figure for his private satisfaction. The world was to bow to her visible beauty, and he gave her enamel and glow, a taller statue, a swimming air, a

transcendancy that exorcised the image of the old witch who had driven him to this.

The result in him was, that Lætitia became humanly and avowedly beautiful. Her dark eyelashes on the pallor of her cheeks lent their aid to the transformation, which was a necessity to him, so it was performed. He received the waxen impression.

His retinue of imps had a revel. We hear wonders of men, and we see a lifting up of hands in the world. The wonders would be explained, and never a hand need to interject, if the mystifying man were but accompanied and reported of by that monkey-eyed confraternity. They spy the heart and its twists.

The heart is the magical gentleman. None of them would follow where there was no heart. The twists of the heart are the comedy.

'*The secret of the heart is its pressing love of self,*' says the Book.

By that secret the mystery of the organ is legible : and a comparison of the heart to the mountain rillet is taken up to show us the unbaffled force of the little channel in seeking to swell its volume, strenuously, sinuously, ever in pursuit of self ; the busiest as it is the most single-aiming of forces on our earth. And we are directed to the sinuosities for the posts of observation chiefly instructive.

Few maintain a stand there. People see, and they rush away to interchange liftings of hands at the sight, instead of patiently studying the phenomenon of energy.

Consequently a man in love with one woman, and in all but absolute consciousness, behind the thinnest of veils, preparing his mind to love another, will be barely credible. The particular hunger of the forceful but adaptable heart is the key of him. Behold the mountain rillet, become

a brook, become a torrent, how it inarms a handsome boulder : yet if the stone will not go with it, on it hurries, pursuing self in extension, down to where perchance a dam has been raised of a sufficient depth to enfold and keep it from inordinate restlessness. Lætitia represented this peaceful restraining space in prospect.

But she was a faded young woman. He was aware of it ; and systematically looking at himself with her up-turned orbs, he accepted her benevolently, as a God grateful for worship, and used the divinity she imparted to paint and renovate her. His heart required her so. The heart works the springs of imagination ; imagination received its commission from the heart, and was a cunning artist.

Cunning to such a degree of seductive genius that the masterpiece it offered to his contemplation enabled him simultaneously to gaze on Clara and think of Lætitia. Clara came through the park-gates with Vernon, a brilliant girl indeed, and a shallow one : a healthy creature, and an animal ; attractive, but capricious, impatient, treacherous, foul ; a woman to drag men through the mud. She approached.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN WHICH WE TAKE A STEP TO THE CENTRE OF EGOISM

THEY met ; Vernon soon left them.

‘ You have not seen Crossjay ? ’ Willoughby inquired.

‘ No,’ said Clara. ‘ Once more I beg you to pardon him. He spoke falsely, owing to his poor boy’s idea of chivalry.’

‘ The chivalry to the sex which commences in lies, ends

by creating the woman's hero, whom we see about the world and in certain Courts of Law.'

His ability to silence her was great : she could not reply to speech like that.

' You have,' said he, ' made a confidante of Mrs. Mount-stuart.'

' Yes.'

' This is your purse.'

' I thank you.'

' Professor Crooklyn has managed to make your father acquainted with your project. That, I suppose, is the railway ticket in the fold of the purse. He was assured at the station that you had taken a ticket to London, and would not want the fly.'

' It is true. I was foolish.'

' You have had a pleasant walk with Vernon—turning me in and out ?'

' We did not speak of you. You allude to what he would never consent to.'

' He's an honest fellow, in his old-fashioned way. He's a secret old fellow. Does he ever talk about his wife to you ?'

Clara dropped her purse, and stooped and picked it up.

' I know nothing of Mr. Whitford's affairs,' she said, and she opened the purse and tore to pieces the railway-ticket.

' The story's a proof that romantic spirits do not furnish the most romantic history. You have the word "chivalry" frequently on your lips. He chivalrously married the daughter of the lodging-house where he resided before I took him. We obtained information of the auspicious union in a newspaper report of Mrs. Whitford's drunkenness and rioting at a London railway terminus—probably the one whither your ticket would have

taken you yesterday, for I heard the lady was on her way to us for supplies, the connubial larder being empty.'

'I am sorry; I am ignorant; I have heard nothing; I know nothing,' said Clara.

'You are disgusted. But half the students and authors you hear of marry in that way. And very few have Vernon's luck.'

'She had good qualities?' asked Clara.

Her under-lip hung.

It looked like disgust; he begged her not indulge the feeling.

'Literary men, it is notorious, even with the entry to society, have no taste in women. The housewife is their object. Ladies frighten and would, no doubt, be an annoyance and hindrance to them at home.'

'You said he was fortunate.'

'You have a kindness for him.'

'I respect him.'

'He is a friendly old fellow in his awkward fashion; honourable, and so forth. But a disreputable alliance of that sort sticks to a man. The world will talk. Yes, he was fortunate so far; he fell into the mire and got out of it. Were he to marry again . . .

'She . . .'

'Died. Do not be startled; it was a natural death. She responded to the sole wishes left to his family. He buried the woman, and I received him. I took him on my tour. A second marriage might cover the first: there would be a buzz about the old business: the woman's relatives write to him still, try to bleed him, I dare say. However, now you understand his gloominess. I don't imagine he regrets his loss. He probably sentimentalizes, like most men when they are well rid of a burden. You must not think the worse of him.'

'I do not,' said Clara.

‘ I defend him whenever the matter ’s discussed.’

‘ I hope you do.’

‘ Without approving his folly. I can’t wash him clean.’

They were at the Hall-doors. She waited for any personal communications he might be pleased to make, and as there was none, she ran upstairs to her room.

He had tossed her to Vernon in his mind not only painlessly, but with a keen acid of satisfaction. The heart is the wizard.

Next he bent his deliberate steps to Lætitia.

The mind was guilty of some hesitation ; the feet went forward.

She was working at an embroidery by an open window. Colonel De Craye leaned outside, and Willoughby pardoned her air of demure amusement, on hearing him say : ‘ No, I have had one of the pleasantest half-hours of my life, and would rather idle here, if idle you will have it, than employ my faculties on horse-back.’

‘ Time is not lost in conversing with Miss Dale,’ said Willoughby.

The light was tender to her complexion where she sat in partial shadow.

De Craye asked whether Crossjay had been caught. Lætitia murmured a kind word for the boy. Willoughby examined her embroidery.

The ladies Eleanor and Isabel appeared.

They invited her to take carriage-exercise with them.

Lætitia did not immediately answer, and Willoughby remarked : ‘ Miss Dale has been reproving Horace for idleness, and I recommend you to enlist him to do duty, while I relieve him here.’

The ladies had but to look at the colonel. He was at their disposal, if they would have him. He was marched to the carriage.

Lætitia plied her threads.

‘Colonel De Craye spoke of Crossjay,’ she said. ‘May I hope you have forgiven the poor boy, Sir Willoughby?’

He replied: ‘Plead for him.’

‘I wish I had eloquence.’

‘In my opinion you have it.’

‘If he offends, it is never from meanness. At school, among comrades, he would shine. He is in too strong a light; his feelings and his moral nature are over-excited.’

‘That was not the case when he was at home with you.’

‘I am severe; I am stern.’

‘A Spartan mother!’

‘My system of managing a boy would be after that model: except in this: he should always feel that he could obtain forgiveness.’

‘Not at the expense of justice?’

‘Ah! young creatures are not to be arraigned before the higher Courts. It seems to me perilous to terrify their imaginations. If we do so, are we not likely to produce the very evil we are combating? The alternations for the young should be school and home: and it should be in their hearts to have confidence that forgiveness alternates with discipline. They are of too tender an age for the rigours of the world; we are in danger of hardening them. I prove to you that I am not possessed of eloquence. You encouraged me to speak, Sir Willoughby.’

‘You speak wisely, Lætitia.’

‘I think it true. Will not you reflect on it? You have only to do so, to forgive him. I am growing bold indeed, and shall have to beg forgiveness for myself.’

‘You still write? you continue to work with your pen?’ said Willoughby.

‘A little; a very little.’

‘I do not like you to squander yourself, waste yourself,

on the public. You are too precious to feed the beast. Giving out incessantly must end by attenuating. Reserve yourself for your friends. Why should they be robbed of so much of you ? Is it not reasonable to assume that by lying fallow you would be more enriched for domestic life ? Candidly, had I authority I would confiscate your pen : I would "away with that bauble." You will not often find me quoting Cromwell, but his words apply in this instance. I would say rather, that lancet. Perhaps it is the more correct term. It bleeds you, it wastes you. For what ? For a breath of fame !

'I write for money.'

'And there—I would say of another—you subject yourself to the risk of mental degradation. Who knows ?—moral ! Trafficking the brains for money, must bring them to the level of the purchasers in time. I confiscate your pen, Lætitia.'

'It will be to confiscate your own gift, Sir Willoughby.'

'Then that proves—will you tell me the date ?'

'You sent me a gold pen-holder on my sixteenth birthday.'

'It proves my utter thoughtlessness then, and later. And later !'

He rested an elbow on his knee and covered his eyes, murmuring in that profound hollow which is haunted by the voice of a contrite past : 'And later !'

The deed could be done. He had come to the conclusion that it could be done, though the effort to harmonize the figure sitting near him, with the artistic figure of his purest pigments, had cost him labour and a blinking of the eyelids. That also could be done. Her pleasant tone, sensible talk, and the light favouring her complexion, helped him in his effort. She was a sober cup ; sober and wholesome. Deliriousness is for adolescence. The men who seek intoxicating cups are men who invite their fates.

Curiously, yet as positively as things can be affirmed, the husband of this woman would be able to boast of her virtues and treasures abroad, as he could not—impossible to say why not—boast of a beautiful wife or a blue-stocking wife. One of her merits as a wife would be this extraordinary neutral merit of a character that demanded colour from the marital hand, and would take it.

Lætitia had not to learn that he had much to distress him. Her wonder at his exposure of his grief counteracted a fluttering of vague alarm. She was nervous; she sat in expectation of some burst of regrets or of passion.

‘I may hope that you have pardoned Crossjay?’ she said.

‘My friend,’ said he, uncovering his face, ‘I am governed by principles. Convince me of an error, I shall not obstinately pursue a premeditated course. But you know me. Men who have not principles to rule their conduct are—well, they are unworthy of a half hour of companionship with you. I will speak to you to-night. I have letters to despatch. To-night: at twelve: in the room where we spoke last. Or await me in the drawing-room. I have to attend on my guests till late.’

He bowed; he was in a hurry to go.

The deed could be done. It must be done; it was his destiny.

CHAPTER XXXIX

IN THE HEART OF THE EGOIST

BUT already he had begun to regard the deed as his executioner. He dreaded meeting Clara. The folly of having retained her stood before him. How now to look

on her and keep a sane resolution unwavering ? She tempted to the insane. Had she been away, he could have walked through the performance composed by the sense of doing a duty to himself : perhaps faintly hating the poor wretch he made happy at last, kind to her in a manner, polite. Clara's presence in the house previous to the deed, and oh, heaven ! after it, threatened his wits. Pride ? He had none ; he cast it down for her to trample it ; he caught it back ere it was trodden on. Yes ; he had pride : he had it as a dagger in his breast : his pride was his misery. But he was too proud to submit to misery. ' What I do is right.' He said the words, and rectitude smoothed his path, till the question clamoured for answer : Would the world countenance and endorse his pride in Lætitia ? At one time, yes. And now ? Clara's beauty ascended, laid a beam on him.

We are on board the labouring vessel of humanity in a storm, when cries and countercries ring out, disorderliness mixes the crew, and the fury of self-preservation divides : this one is for the ship, that one for his life. Clara was the former to him, Lætitia the latter. But what if there might not be greater safety in holding tenaciously to Clara than in casting her off for Lætitia ? No, she had done things to set his pride throbbing in the quick. She had gone bleeding about first to one, then to another ; she had betrayed him to Vernon, and to Mrs. Mountstuart ; a look in the eyes of Horace De Craye said, to him as well : to whom not ? He might hold to her for vengeance ; but that appetite was short-lived in him if it ministered nothing to his purposes.

' I discard all idea of vengeance,' he said, and thrilled burningly to a smart in his admiration of the man who could be so magnanimous under mortal injury : for the more admirable he, the more pitiable. He drank a drop or two of self-pity like a poison, repelling the assaults of

public pity. Clara must be given up. It must be seen by the world that, as he felt, the thing he did was right. Laocoon of his own serpents, he struggled to a certain magnificence of attitude in the muscular net of constrictions he flung around himself. Clara must be given up. O bright Abominable ! She must be given up : but not to one whose touch of her would be darts in the blood of the yielder, snakes in his bed : she must be given up to an extinguisher ; to be the second wife of an old-fashioned semi-recluse, disgraced in his first. And were it publicly known that she had been cast off, and had fallen on old Vernon for a refuge, and part in spite, part in shame, part in desperation, part in a fit of good sense under the circumstances, espoused him, her beauty would not influence the world in its judgement. The world would know what to think. As the instinct of self-preservation whispered to Willoughby, the world, were it requisite, might be taught to think what it assuredly would not think if she should be seen tripping to the altar with Horace De Craye. Self-preservation, not vengeance, breathed that whisper. He glanced at her iniquity for a justification of it, without any desire to do her a permanent hurt : he was highly civilized : but with a strong intention to give her all the benefit of the scandal, supposing a scandal, or ordinary tattle.

‘ And so he handed her to his cousin and secretary, Vernon Whitford, who opened his mouth and shut his eyes.’

You hear the world ? How are we to stop it from chattering ? Enough that he had no desire to harm her. Some gentle anticipations of her being tarnished were imperative ; they came spontaneously to him ; otherwise the radiance of that bright Abominable in loss would have been insufferable ; he could not have borne it ; he could never have surrendered her.

Moreover, a happy present effect was the result. He conjured up the anticipated chatter and shrug of the world so vividly that her beauty grew hectic with the stain, bereft of its formidable magnetism. He could meet her calmly; he had steeled himself. Purity in women was his principal stipulation, and a woman puffed at, was not the person to cause him tremours.

Consider him indulgently: the Egoist is the Son of Himself. He is likewise the Father. And the son loves the father, the father the son; they reciprocate affection through the closest of ties; and shall they view behaviour unkindly wounding either of them, not for each other's dear sake abhorring the criminal? They would not injure you, but they cannot consent to see one another suffer or crave in vain. The two rub together in sympathy besides relationship to an intenser one. Are you, without much offending, sacrificed by them, it is on the altar of their mutual love, to filial piety or paternal tenderness: the younger has offered a dainty morsel to the elder, or the elder to the younger. Absorbed in their great example of devotion, they do not think of you. They are beautiful.

Yet is it most true that the younger has the passions of youth: whereof will come division between them; and this is a tragic state. They are then pathetic. This was the state of Sir Willoughby lending ear to his elder, until he submitted to bite at the fruit proposed to him—with how wry a mouth the venerable senior chose not to mark. At least, as we perceive, a half of him was ripe of wisdom in his own interests. The cruder half had but to be obedient to the leadership of sagacity for his interests to be secured, and a filial disposition assisted him; painfully indeed; but the same rare quality directed the good gentleman to swallow his pain. That the son should bewail his fate were a dishonour to the

sire. He revered, and submitted. Thus, to say, consider him indulgently, is too much an appeal for charity on behalf of one requiring but initial anatomy—a slicing in halves—to exonerate, perchance exalt him. The Egoist is our fountain-head, primeval man: the primitive is born again, the elemental reconstituted. Born again, into new conditions, the primitive may be highly polished of men, and forfeit nothing save the roughness of his original nature. He is not only his own father, he is ours; and he is also our son. We have produced him, he us. Such were we, to such are we returning: not other, sings the poet, than one who toils fully works his shallop against the tide, ‘*si brachia forte remisit*’:—let him haply relax the labour of his arms, however high up the stream, and back he goes, ‘*in pejus*,’ to the early principle of our being, with seeds and plants, that are as carelessly weighed in the hand and as indiscriminately husbanded as our humanity.

Poets on the other side may be cited for an assurance that the primitive is not the degenerate: rather is he a sign of the indestructibility of the race, of the ancient energy in removing obstacles to individual growth; a sample of what we would be, had we his concentrated power. He is the original innocent, the pure simple. It is we who have fallen; we have melted into Society, diluted our essence, dissolved. He stands in the midst monumentally, a landmark of the tough and honest old Ages, with the symbolic alphabet of striking arms and running legs, our early language, scrawled over his person, and the glorious first flint and arrow-head for his crest: at once the spectre of the Kitchen-midden and our ripest issue.

But Society is about him. The occasional spectacle of the primitive dangling on a rope, has impressed his mind with the strength of his natural enemy: from which

uncongenial sight he has turned shuddering hardly less to behold the blast that is blown upon a reputation where one has been disrespectful of the many. By these means, through meditation on the contrast of circumstances in life, a pulse of imagination has begun to stir, and he has entered the upper sphere, or circle of spiritual Egoism : he has become the civilized Egoist ; primitive still, as sure as man has teeth, but developed in his manner of using them.

Degenerate or not (and there is no just reason to suppose it), Sir Willoughby was a social Egoist, fiercely imaginative in whatsoever concerned him. He had discovered a greater realm than that of the sensual appetites, and he rushed across and around it in his conquering period with an Alexander's pride. On these wind-like journeys he had carried Constantia, subsequently Clara ; and however it may have been in the case of Miss Durham, in that of Miss Middleton it is almost certain she caught her glimpse of his interior from sheer fatigue in hearing him discourse of it. What he revealed was not the cause of her sickness : women can bear revelations—they are exciting : but the monotonousness. He slew imagination. There is no direr disaster in love than the death of imagination. He dragged her through the labyrinths of his penetralia, in his hungry coveting to be loved more and still more, more still, until imagination gave up the ghost, and he talked to her plain hearing like a monster. It must have been that ; for the spell of the primitive upon women is masterful up to the time of contact.

‘And so he handed her to his cousin and secretary, Vernon Whitford, who opened his mouth and shut his eyes.’

The urgent question was, how it was to be accomplished. Willoughby worked at the subject with all his power of concentration : a power that had often led him to feel

and say, that as a barrister, a diplomatist, or a general, he would have won his grades : and granting him a personal interest in the business, he might have achieved eminence : he schemed and fenced remarkably well.

He projected a scene, following expressions of anxiety on account of old Vernon and his future settlement : and then—Clara maintaining her doggedness, to which he was now so accustomed that he could not conceive a change in it—says he : ‘ If you determine on breaking, I give you back your word *on one condition*.’ Whereupon she starts : he insists on her promise : she declines : affairs resume their former footing ; she frets, she begs for the disclosure : he flatters her by telling her his desire to keep her in the family : she is unilluminated, but strongly moved by curiosity : he philosophizes on marriage—‘ What are we ? poor creatures ! we must get through life as we can, doing as much good as we can to those we love ; and think as you please, I love old Vernon. Am I not giving you the greatest possible proof of it ? ’ She will not see. Then flatly out comes the one condition. That and no other. ‘ Take Vernon and I release you.’ She refuses. Now ensues the debate, all the oratory being with him. ‘ Is it because of his unfortunate first marriage ? You assured me you thought no worse of him ’ : etc. She declares the proposal revolting. He can distinguish nothing that should offend her in a proposal to make his cousin happy if she will not him. Irony and sarcasm relieve his emotions, but he convinces her he is dealing plainly and intends generosity. She is confused ; she speaks in maiden fashion.

He touches again on Vernon’s early escapade. She does not enjoy it. The scene closes with his bidding her reflect on it, and remember the one condition of her release. Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, now reduced to believe that he burns to be free, is then called in for an

interview with Clara. His aunts Eleanor and Isabel besiege her. Lætitia in passionate earnest besieges her. Her father is wrought on to besiege her. Finally Vernon is attacked by Willoughby and Mrs. Mountstuart :—and here, Willoughby chose to think, was the main difficulty. But the girl has money ; she is agreeable ; Vernon likes her ; she is fond of his ‘ Alps,’ they have tastes in common, he likes her father, and in the end he besieges her. Will she yield ? De Craye is absent. There is no other way of shunning a marriage she is incomprehensibly but frantically averse to. She is in the toils. Her father will stay at Patterne Hall as long as his host desires it. She hesitates, she is overcome ; in spite of a certain nausea due to Vernon’s preceding alliance, she yields.

Willoughby revolved the entire drama in Clara’s presence. It helped him to look on her coolly. Conducting her to the dinner-table, he spoke of Crossjay, not unkindly ; and at table he revolved the set of scenes with a heated animation that took fire from the wine and the face of his friend Horace, while he encouraged Horace to be flowingly Irish. He nipped the fellow good-humouredly once or twice, having never felt so friendly to him since the day of his arrival ; but the position of critic is instinctively taken by men who do not flow : and Patterne Port kept Dr. Middleton in a benevolent reserve when Willoughby decided that something said by De Craye was not new, and laughingly accused him of failing to consult his anecdotal note-book for the double-cross to his last sprightly sally. ‘ Your sallies are excellent, Horace, but spare us your Aunt Sallies ! ’ De Craye had no repartee, nor did Dr. Middleton challenge a pun. We have only to sharpen our wits to trip your seductive rattler whenever we may choose to think proper ; and evidently, if we condescended to it, we could do better than he. The critic who has hatched a witticism is impelled to this

opinion. Judging by the smiles of the ladies, they thought so too.

Shortly before eleven o'clock, Dr. Middleton made a Spartan stand against the offer of another bottle of Port. The regulation couple of bottles had been consumed in equal partnership, and the Rev. Doctor and his host were free to pay a ceremonial visit to the drawing-room, where they were not expected. A piece of work of the elder ladies, a silken boudoir sofa-rug, was being examined, with high approval of the two younger. Vernon and Colonel De Craye had gone out in search of Crossjay, one to Mr. Dale's cottage, the other to call at the head and under-gamekeepers. They were said to be strolling and smoking, for the night was fine. Willoughby left the room and came back with the key of Crossjay's door in his pocket. He foresaw that the delinquent might be of service to him.

Lætitia and Clara sang together. Lætitia was flushed, Clara pale. At eleven they saluted the ladies Eleanor and Isabel. Willoughby said, ' Good night ' to each of them, contrasting as he did so the downcast look of Lætitia with Clara's frigid directness. He divined that they were off to talk over their one object of common interest, Crossjay. Saluting his aunts, he took up the rug, to celebrate their diligence and taste ; and that he might make Dr. Middleton impatient for bed, he provoked him to admire it, held it out and laid it out, and caused the courteous old gentleman some confusion in hitting on fresh terms of commendation.

Before midnight the room was empty. Ten minutes later, Willoughby paid it a visit, and found it untenanted by the person he had engaged to be there. Vexed by his disappointment, he paced up and down, and chanced abstractedly to catch the rug in his hand ; for what purpose, he might well ask himself ; admiration of ladies'

work, in their absence, was unlikely to occur to him. Nevertheless the touch of the warm soft silk was meltingly feminine. A glance at the mantelpiece clock told him Lætitia was twenty minutes behind the hour.

Her remissness might endanger all his plans, alter the whole course of his life. The colours in which he painted her were too lively to last ; the madness in his head threatened to subside. Certain it was that he could not be ready a second night for the sacrifice he had been about to perform.

The clock was at the half hour after twelve. He flung the silken thing on the central ottoman, extinguished the lamps, and walked out of the room, charging the absent Lætitia to bear her misfortune with a consciousness of deserving it.

CHAPTER XL

MIDNIGHT : SIR WILLOUGHBY AND LÆTITIA : WITH YOUNG CROSSJAY UNDER A COVERLET

YOUNG Crossjay was a glutton at holidays and never thought of home till it was dark. The close of the day saw him several miles away from the Hall, dubious whether he would not round his numerous adventures by sleeping at an inn ; for he had lots of money, and the idea of jumping up in the morning in a strange place was thrilling. Besides, when he was shaken out of sleep by Sir Willoughby, he had been told that he was to go, and not to show his face at Patterne again. On the other hand, Miss Middleton had bidden him come back. There was little question with him which person he should obey : he followed his heart.

Supper at an inn, where he found a company to listen to

his adventures, delayed him, and a short cut, intended to make up for it, lost him his road. He reached the Hall very late, ready to be in love with the horrible pleasure of a night's rest under the stars, if necessary. But a candle burned at one of the back windows. He knocked, and a kitchen-maid let him in. She had a bowl of hot soup prepared for him. Crossjay tried a mouthful to please her. His head dropped over it. She roused him to his feet, and he pitched against her shoulder. The dry air of the kitchen department had proved too much for the tired youngster. Mary, the maid, got him to step as firmly as he was able, and led him by the back-way to the hall, bidding him creep noiselessly to bed. He understood his position in the house, and though he could have gone fast to sleep on the stairs, he took a steady aim at his room and gained the door cat-like. The door resisted. He was appalled and unstrung in a minute. The door was locked. Crossjay felt as if he were in the presence of Sir Willoughby. He fled on rickety legs, and had a fall and bumps down half-a-dozen stairs. A door opened above. He rushed across the hall to the drawing-room, invitingly open, and there staggered in darkness to the ottoman and rolled himself in something sleek and warm, soft as hands of ladies, and redolent of them ; so delicious that he hugged the folds about his head and heels. While he was endeavouring to think where he was, his legs curled, his eyelids shut, and he was in the thick of the day's adventures, doing yet more wonderful things.

He heard his own name : that was quite certain. He knew that he heard it with his ears, as he pursued the fleetest dreams ever accorded to mortal. It did not mix : it was outside him, and like the danger-pole in the ice, which the skater shooting hither and yonder comes on again, it recurred ; and now it marked a point in his career, now it caused him to relax his pace ; he began to

circle, and whirled closer round it, until, as at a blow, his heart knocked, he tightened himself, thought of bolting, and lay dead-still to throb and hearken.

‘ Oh ! Sir Willoughby,’ a voice had said.

The accents were sharp with alarm.

‘ My friend ! my dearest ! ’ was the answer.

‘ I came to speak of Crossjay.’

‘ Will you sit here, on the ottoman ? ’

‘ No, I cannot wait. I hoped I had heard Crossjay return. I would rather not sit down. May I entreat you to pardon him when he comes home ? ’

‘ You, and you only, may do so. I permit none else. Of Crossjay to-morrow.’

‘ He may be lying in the fields. We are anxious.’

‘ The rascal can take pretty good care of himself.’

‘ Crossjay is perpetually meeting accidents.’

‘ He shall be indemnified if he has had excess of punishment.’

‘ I think I will say good night, Sir Willoughby.’

‘ When freely and unreservedly you have given me your hand.’

There was hesitation.

‘ To say good night ? ’

‘ I ask for your hand.’

‘ Good night, Sir Willoughby.’

‘ You do not give it. You are in doubt ? Still ? What language must I use to convince you ? And yet you know me. Who knows me but you ? You have always known me. You are my home and my temple. Have you forgotten your verses for the day of my majority ?

“ The dawn-star has arisen
In plenitude of light . . . ”

‘ Do not repeat them, pray ! ’ cried Lætitia with a gasp.

‘ I have repeated them to myself a thousand times : in India, America, Japan : they were like our English skylark carolling to me.

“ My heart, now burst thy prison
With proud aerial flight ! ” ’

‘ Oh ! I beg you will not force me to listen to nonsense that I wrote when I was a child. No more of those most foolish lines ! If you knew what it is to write and despise one’s writing, you would not distress me. And since you will not speak of Crossjay to-night, allow me to retire.’

‘ You know me, and therefore you know my contempt for verses, as a rule, Lætitia. But not for yours to me. Why should you call them foolish ? They expressed your feelings—I hold them sacred. They are something religious to me, not mere poetry. Perhaps the third verse is my favourite . . .’

‘ It will be more than I can bear ! ’

‘ You were in earnest when you wrote them ? ’

‘ I was very young, very enthusiastic, very silly.’

‘ You were and are my image of constancy ! ’

‘ It is an error, Sir Willoughby ; I am far from being the same.’

‘ We are all older, I trust wiser. I am, I will own ; much wiser. Wise at last ! I offer you my hand.’

She did not reply.

‘ I offer you my hand and name, Lætitia ! ’

No response.

‘ You think me bound in honour to another ? ’

She was mute.

‘ I am free. Thank heaven ! I am free to choose my mate—the woman I have always loved ! Freely and unreservedly, as I ask you to give your hand, I offer mine. You are the mistress of Patterne Hall ; my wife ! ’

She had not a word.

‘My dearest! do you not rightly understand? The hand I am offering you is disengaged. It is offered to the lady I respect above all others. I have made the discovery that I cannot love without respecting; and as I will not marry without loving, it ensues that I am free—I am yours. At last?—your lips move: tell me the word. *Have always loved*, I said. You carry in your bosom the magnet of constancy, and I, in spite of apparent deviations, declare to you that I have never ceased to be sensible of the attraction. And now there is not an impediment. We two against the world! we are one. Let me confess to an old foible—perfectly youthful, and you will ascribe it to youth: once I desired to absorb. I mistrusted; that was the reason: I perceive it. You teach me the difference of an alliance with a lady of intellect. The pride I have in you, Lætitia, definitely cures me of that insane passion—call it an insatiable hunger. I recognize it as a folly of youth. I have, as it were, gone the tour, to come home to you—at last?—and live our manly life of comparative equals. At last, then! But remember, that in the younger man you would have had a despot—perhaps a jealous despot. Young men, I assure you, are orientally inclined in their ideas of love. Love gets a bad name from them. We, my Lætitia, do not regard love as a selfishness. If it is, it is the essence of life. At least it is our selfishness rendered beautiful. I talk to you like a man who has found a compatriot in a foreign land. It seems to me that I have not opened my mouth for an age. I certainly have not unlocked my heart. Those who sing for joy are not unintelligible to me. If I had not something in me worth saying, I think I should sing. In every sense you reconcile me to men and the world, Lætitia. Why press you to speak? I will be the speaker. As surely as you know me, I know you; and . . .’

Lætitia burst forth with, 'No !'

'I do not know you ?' said he, searchingly mellifluous.

'Hardly.'

'How not ?'

'I am changed.'

'In what way ?'

'Deeply.'

'Sedater ?'

'Materially.'

'Colour will come back : have no fear ; I promise it. If you imagine you want renewing, *I* have the specific, I, my love, I !'

'Forgive me—will you tell me, Sir Willoughby, whether you have broken with Miss Middleton ?'

'Rest satisfied, my dear Lætitia. She is as free as I am. I can do no more than a man of honour should do. She releases me. To-morrow or next day she departs. We, Lætitia, you and I, my love, are home birds. It does not do for the home bird to couple with the migratory. The little imperceptible change you allude to, is nothing. Italy will restore you. I am ready to stake my own health—never yet shaken by a doctor of medicine :—I say medicine advisedly, for there are Doctors of Divinity who would shake giants :—that an Italian trip will send you back—that I shall bring you home from Italy a blooming bride. You shake your head—despondently ? My love, I guarantee it. Cannot I give you colour ? Behold ! Come to the light, look in the glass.'

'I may redden,' said Lætitia. 'I suppose that is due to the action of the heart. I am changed. Heart, for any other purpose, I have not. I am like you, Sir Willoughby, in this : I could not marry without loving, and I do not know what love is, except that it is an empty dream.'

'Marriage, my dearest . . .'

‘ You are mistaken.’

‘ I will cure you, my Lætitia. Look to me, I am the tonic. It is not common confidence, but conviction. I, my love, I !’

‘ There is no cure for what I feel, Sir Willoughby.’

‘ Spare me the formal prefix, I beg. You place your hand in mine, relying on me. I am pledged for the remainder. We end as we began : my request is for your hand—your hand in marriage.’

‘ I cannot give it.’

‘ To be my wife !’

‘ It is an honour : I must decline it.’

‘ Are you quite well, Lætitia ? I propose in the plainest terms I can employ, to make you Lady Patterne—mine.’

‘ I am compelled to refuse.’

‘ Why ? Refuse ? Your reason !’

‘ The reason has been named.’

He took a stride to inspirit his wits.

‘ There’s a madness comes over women at times, I know. Answer me, Lætitia :—by all the evidence a man can have, I could swear it :—but answer me : you loved me once ?’

‘ I was an exceedingly foolish, romantic girl.’

‘ You evade my question : I am serious. Oh !’ he walked away from her, booming a sound of utter repudiation of her present imbecility, and hurrying to her side, said : ‘ But it was manifest to the whole world ! It was a legend. To love like Lætitia Dale, was a current phrase. You were an example, a light to women : no one was your match for devotion. You were a precious cameo, still gazing ! And I was the object. You loved me. You loved me, you belonged to me, you were mine, my possession, my jewel ; I was prouder of your constancy than of anything else that I had on earth. It was a part of the

order of the universe to me. A doubt of it would have disturbed my creed. Why, good heaven ! where are we ? Is nothing solid on earth ? You loved me ! ’

‘ I was childish indeed. ’

‘ You loved me passionately ! ’

‘ Do you insist on shaming me through and through, Sir Willoughby ? I have been exposed enough. ’

‘ You cannot blot out the past : it is written, it is recorded. You loved me devotedly, silence is no escape. You loved me. ’

‘ I did. ’

‘ You never loved me, you shallow woman ! “ I did ! ” As if there could be a cessation of a love ! What are we to reckon on as ours ? We prize a woman’s love ; we guard it jealously, we trust to it, dream of it ; *there* is our wealth ; there is our talisman ! And when we open the casket, it has flown !—barren vacuity !—we are poorer than dogs. As well think of keeping a costly wine in potter’s clay as love in the heart of a woman ! There are women—women ! Oh ! they are all of a stamp—coin ! Coin for any hand ! It’s a fiction, an imposture—they cannot love ! They are the shadows of men. Compared with men, they have as much heart in them as the shadow beside the body ! Lætitia ! ’

‘ Sir Willoughby. ’

‘ You refuse my offer ? ’

‘ I must. ’

‘ You refuse to take me for your husband ? ’

‘ I cannot be your wife. ’

‘ You have changed ? . . . You have set your heart ? . . . You could marry ? . . . there is a man ? . . . You could marry one ! I will have an answer, I am sick of evasions. What was in the mind of heaven when women were created, will be the riddle to the end of the world ! Every good man in turn has made the inquiry.

I have a right to know who robs me—We may try as we like to solve it.—Satan is painted laughing!—I say I have a right to know who robs me. Answer me.'

'I shall not marry.'

'That is not an answer.'

'I love no one.'

'You loved me.—You are silent?—but you confessed it. Then you confess it was a love that could die! Are you unable to perceive how that redounds to my discredit? You loved me, you have ceased to love me. In other words, you charge me with incapacity to sustain a woman's love. You accuse me of inspiring a miserable passion that cannot last a life-time! You let the world see that I am a man to be aimed at for a temporary mark! And simply because I happen to be in your neighbourhood at an age when a young woman is impressionable! You make a public example of me as a man for whom women may have a caprice, but that is all; he cannot enchain them; he fascinates passingly; they fall off. Is it just, for me to be taken up and cast down at your will? Reflect on that scandal! Shadows? Why, a man's shadow is faithful to him at least. What are women? There is not a comparison in nature that does not tower above them! not one that does not hoot at them! I, throughout my life guided by absolute deference to their weakness—paying them politeness, courtesy—whatever I touch I am happy in, except when I touch women! How is it? What is the mystery? Some monstrous explanation must exist. What can it be? I am favoured by fortune from my birth until I enter into relations with women! But will you be so good as to account for it in your defence of them? Oh! were the relations dishonourable, it would be quite another matter. *Then* they . . . I could recount . . . I disdain to chronicle such victories. Quite another matter! But they are flies,

and I am something more stable. They are flies. I look beyond the day; I owe a duty to my line. They are flies. I foresee it, I shall be crossed in my fate so long as I fail to shun them—flies! Not merely born for the day, I maintain that they are spiritually ephemeral.—Well, my opinion of your sex is directly traceable to you. You may alter it, or fling another of us men out on the world with the old bitter experience. Consider this, that it is on your head if my ideal of women is wrecked. It rests with you to restore it. I love you. I discover that you are the one woman I have always loved. I come to you, I sue you, and suddenly—you have changed! “I have changed: I am not the same.” What can it mean? “I cannot marry: I love no one.” And you say you do not know what love is—avowing in the same breath that you did love me! Am I the empty dream? My hand, heart, fortune, name, are yours, at your feet: you kick them hence. I am here—you reject me. But why, for what mortal reason am I here other than my faith in your love? You drew me to you, to repel me, and have a wretched revenge.’

‘You know it is not that, Sir Willoughby.’

‘Have you any possible suspicion that I am still entangled, not, as I assure you I am, perfectly free in fact and in honour?’

‘It is not that.’

‘Name it; for you see your power. Would you have me kneel to you, madam?’

‘Oh! no; it would complete my grief.’

‘You feel grief? Then you believe in my affection, and you hurl it away. I have no doubt that as a poetess, you would say, love is eternal. And you have loved me. And you tell me you love me no more. You are not very logical, Lætitia Dale.’

‘Poetesses rarely are: if I am one, which I little

pretend to be for writing silly verses. I have passed out of that delusion, with the rest.'

'You shall not wrong those dear old days, Lætitia. I see them now ; when I rode by your cottage and you were at your window, pen in hand, your hair straying over your forehead. Romantic, yes ; not foolish. Why were you foolish in thinking of me ? Some day I will commission an artist to paint me that portrait of you from my description. And I remember when we first whispered . . . I remember your trembling. You have forgotten—I remember. I remember our meeting in the park on the path to church. I remember the heavenly morning of my return from my travels, and the same Lætitia meeting me, steadfast and unchangeable. Could I ever forget ? Those are ineradicable scenes ; pictures of my youth, interwound with me. I may say, that as I recede from them, I dwell on them the more. Tell me, Lætitia, was there not a certain prophecy of your father's concerning us two ? I fancy I heard of one. There was one.'

'He was an invalid. Elderly people nurse illusions.'

'Ask yourself, Lætitia, who is the obstacle to the fulfilment of his prediction ?—truth, if ever a truth was foreseen on earth ! You have not changed so far that you would feel *no* pleasure in gratifying him ? I go to him to-morrow morning with the first light.'

'You will compel me to follow, and undeceive him.'

'Do so, and I denounce an unworthy affection you are ashamed to avow.'

'That would be idle, though it would be base.'

'Proof of love, then ! For no one but you should it be done, and no one but you dare accuse me of a baseness.'

'Sir Willoughby, you will let my father die in peace.'

'He and I together will contrive to persuade you.'

'You tempt me to imagine that you want a wife at any cost.'

‘ You, Lætitia, you.’

‘ I am tired,’ she said. ‘ It is late, I would rather not hear more. I am sorry if I have caused you pain. I suppose you to have spoken with candour. I defend neither my sex nor myself. I can only say, I am a woman as good as dead : happy to be made happy in my way, but so little alive that I cannot realize any other way. As for love, I am thankful to have broken a spell. You have a younger woman in your mind ; I am an old one : I have no ambition and no warmth. My utmost prayer is to float on the stream—a purely physical desire of life : I have no strength to swim. Such a woman is not the wife for you, Sir Willoughby. Good night.’

‘ One final word. Weigh it. Express no conventional regrets. Resolutely you refuse ? ’

‘ Resolutely I do.’

‘ You refuse ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘ I have sacrificed my pride for nothing ! You refuse ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘ Humbled myself ! And this is the answer ! You do refuse ? ’

‘ I do.’

‘ Good night, Lætitia Dale.’

He gave her passage.

‘ Good night, Sir Willoughby.’

‘ I am in your power,’ he said in a voice between supplication and menace that laid a claw on her, and she turned and replied :

‘ You will not be betrayed.’

‘ I can trust you . . . ? ’

‘ I go home to-morrow before breakfast.’

‘ Permit me to escort you upstairs.’

‘ If you please : but I see no one here either to-night or to-morrow.’

‘ It is for the privilege of seeing the last of you.’

They withdrew.

Young Crossjay listened to the drumming of his head. Somewhere in or over the cavity a drummer rattled tremendously.

Sir Willoughby’s laboratory-door shut with a slam.

Crossjay tumbled himself off the ottoman. He stole up to the unclosed drawing-room door, and peeped. Never was a boy more thoroughly awakened. His object was to get out of the house and go through the night avoiding everything human, for he was big with information of a character that he knew to be of the nature of gunpowder, and he feared to explode. He crossed the hall. In the passage to the scullery, he ran against Colonel De Craye.

‘ So there you are,’ said the colonel, ‘ I ’ve been hunting you.’

Crossjay related that his bed-room door was locked and the key gone, and Sir Willoughby sitting up in the laboratory.

Colonel De Craye took the boy to his own room, where Crossjay lay on a sofa, comfortably covered over and snug in a swelling pillow ; but he was restless ; he wanted to speak, to bellow, to cry ; and he bounced round to his left side, and bounced to his right, not knowing what to think, except that there was treason to his adored Miss Middleton.

‘ Why, my lad, you ’re not half a campaigner,’ the colonel called out to him ; attributing his uneasiness to the material discomfort of the sofa : and Crossjay had to swallow the taunt, bitter though it was. A dim sentiment of impropriety in unburdening his overcharged mind on the subject of Miss Middleton to Colonel De Craye, restrained him from defending himself ; and so he heaved and tossed about till daybreak. At an early hour, while

his hospitable friend, who looked very handsome in profile half breast and head above the sheets, continued to slumber, Crossjay was on his legs and away.

‘He says I ’m not half a campaigner, and a couple of hours of bed are enough for me,’ the boy thought proudly, and snuffed the springing air of the young sun on the fields. A glance back at Patterne Hall dismayed him, for he knew not how to act, and he was immoderately combustible, too full of knowledge for self-containment ; much too zealously-excited on behalf of his dear Miss Middleton to keep silent for many hours of the day.

CHAPTER XLI

THE REV. DR. MIDDLETON, CLARA, AND SIR WILLOUGHBY

WHEN Master Crossjay tumbled down the stairs, Lætitia was in Clara’s room, speculating on the various mishaps which might have befallen that battered youngster ; and Clara listened anxiously after Lætitia had run out, until she heard Sir Willoughby’s voice ; which in some way satisfied her that the boy was not in the house.

She waited, expecting Miss Dale to return ; then undressed, went to bed, tried to sleep. She was tired of strife. Strange thoughts for a young head shot through her : as, that it is possible for the sense of duty to counteract distaste ; and that one may live a life apart from one’s admirations and dislikes : she owned the singular strength of Sir Willoughby in outwearying : she asked herself how much she had gained by struggling :—every effort seemed to expend her spirit’s force, and rendered her less able to get the clear vision of her prospects, as though it had sunk her deeper : the contrary of her

intention to make each further step confirm her liberty. Looking back, she marvelled at the things she had done. Looking round, how ineffectual they appeared ! She had still the great scene of positive rebellion to go through with her father.

The anticipation of that was the cause of her extreme discouragement. He had not spoken to her since he became aware of her attempted flight : but the scene was coming ; and besides the wish not to inflict it on him, as well as to escape it herself, the girl's peculiar unhappiness lay in her knowledge that they were alienated and stood opposed, owing to one among the more perplexing masculine weaknesses, which she could not hint at, dared barely think of, and would not name in her meditations. Diverting to other subjects, she allowed herself to exclaim : ' Wine ! wine ! ' in renewed wonder of what there could be in wine to entrap venerable men and obscure their judgements. She was too young to consider that her being very much in the wrong gave all the importance to the cordial glass in a venerable gentleman's appreciation of his dues. Why should he fly from a priceless wine to gratify the caprices of a fantastical child guilty of seeking to commit a breach of faith ? He harped on those words. Her fault was grave. No doubt the wine coloured it to him, as a drop or two will do in any cup : still her fault was grave.

She was too young for such considerations. She was ready to expatiate on the gravity of her fault, so long as the humiliation assisted to her disentanglement : her snared nature in the toils would not permit her to reflect on it further. She had never accurately perceived it : for the reason perhaps that Willoughby had not been moving in his appeals : but, admitting the charge of waywardness, she had come to terms with conscience, upon the understanding that she was to perceive it and

regret it and do penance for it by-and-by :—by renouncing marriage altogether ? How light a penance !

In the morning, she went to Lætitia's room, knocked and had no answer.

She was informed at the breakfast-table of Miss Dale's departure. The ladies Eleanor and Isabel feared it to be a case of urgency at the cottage. No one had seen Vernon, and Clara requested Colonel De Craye to walk over to the cottage for news of Crossjay. He accepted the commission, simply to obey and be in her service : assuring her, however, that there was no need to be disturbed about the boy. He would have told her more, had not Dr. Middleton led her out.

Sir Willoughby marked a lapse of ten minutes by his watch. His excellent aunts had ventured a comment on his appearance, that frightened him lest he himself should be the person to betray his astounding discomfiture. He regarded his conduct as an act of madness, and Lætitia's as no less that of a madwoman—happily mad ! Very happily mad indeed ! Her rejection of his ridiculously generous proposal seemed to show an intervening hand in his favour, that sent her distraught at the right moment. He entirely trusted her to be discreet ; but she was a miserable creature, who had lost the one last chance offered her by Providence, and furnished him with a signal instance of the mediocrity of woman's love.

Time was flying. In a little while Mrs. Mountstuart would arrive. He could not fence her without a design in his head ; he was destitute of an armoury if he had no scheme : he racked the brain only to succeed in rousing phantasmal vapours. Her infernal 'Twice' ; would cease now to apply to Lætitia : it would be an echo of Lady Busshe. Nay, were all in the secret, *Thrice* jilted ! might become the universal roar. And this, he reflected bitterly, of a man whom nothing but duty to his line had arrested

from being the most mischievous of his class with women !
Such is our reward for uprightness !

At the expiration of fifteen minutes by his watch, he struck a knuckle on the library-door. Dr. Middleton held it open to him.

‘ You are disengaged, sir ? ’

‘ The sermon is upon the paragraph which is toned to awaken the clerk,’ replied the Rev. Doctor.

Clara was weeping.

Sir Willoughby drew near her solicitously.

Dr. Middleton’s mane of silvery hair was in a state bearing witness to the vehemence of the sermon, and Willoughby said : ‘ I hope, sir, you have not made too much of a trifle.’

‘ I believe, sir, that I have produced an effect, and that was the point in contemplation.’

‘ Clara ! my dear Clara ! ’ Willoughby touched her.

‘ She sincerely repents her conduct, I may inform you,’ said Dr. Middleton.

‘ My love ! ’ Willoughby whispered. ‘ We have had a misunderstanding. I am at a loss to discover where I have been guilty, but I take the blame, all the blame. I implore you not to weep. Do me the favour to look at me. I would not have had you subjected to any interrogation whatever.’

‘ You are not to blame,’ Clara said on a sob.

‘ Undoubtedly Willoughby is not to blame. It was not he who was bound on a runaway errand in flagrant breach of duty and decorum, nor he who inflicted a catarrh on a brother of my craft and cloth,’ said her father.

‘ The clerk, sir, has pronounced Amen,’ observed Willoughby.

‘ And no man is happier to hear an ejaculation that he has laboured for with so much sweat of his brow than the parson, I can assure you,’ Dr. Middleton mildly groaned.

‘ I have notions of the trouble of Abraham. A sermon of that description is an immolation of the parent, however it may go with the child.’

Willoughby soothed his Clara.

‘ I wish I had been here to share it. I might have saved you some tears. I may have been hasty in our little dissensions. I will acknowledge that I have been. My temper is often irascible.’

‘ And so is mine ! ’ exclaimed Dr. Middleton. ‘ And yet I am not aware that I made the worse husband for it. Nor do I rightly comprehend how a probably justly exciteable temper can stand for a plea in mitigation of an attempt at an outrageous breach of faith.’

‘ The sermon is over, sir.’

‘ Reverberations ! ’ the Rev. Doctor waved his arm placably. ‘ Take it for thunder heard remote.’

‘ Your hand, my love,’ Willoughby murmured.

The hand was not put forth.

Dr. Middleton remarked the fact. He walked to the window, and perceiving the pair in the same position when he faced about he delivered a cough of admonition.

‘ It is cruel ! ’ said Clara.

‘ That the owner of your hand should petition you for it ? ’ inquired her father.

She sought refuge in a fit of tears.

Willoughby bent above her, mute.

‘ Is a scene that is hardly conceivable as a parent’s obligation once in a lustrum, to be repeated within the half hour ? ’ shouted her father.

She drew up her shoulders and shook ; let them fall and dropped her head.

‘ My dearest ! your hand ! ’ fluted Willoughby.

The hand surrendered ; it was much like the icicle of a sudden thaw.

Willoughby squeezed it to his ribs.

Dr. Middleton marched up and down the room with his arms locked behind him. The silence between the young people seemed to denounce his presence.

He said cordially : ‘ Old Hiems has but to withdraw for buds to burst. “ Jam ver egelidos refert tepores.” The æquinocial fury departs. I will leave you for a term.’

Clara and Willoughby simultaneously raised their faces with opposing expressions.

‘ My girl ? ’ her father stood by her, laying gentle hand on her.

‘ Yes, papa, I will come out to you,’ she replied to his apology for the rather heavy weight of his vocabulary, and smiled.

‘ No, sir, I beg you will remain,’ said Willoughby.

‘ I keep you frost-bound.’

Clara did not deny it.

Willoughby emphatically did.

Then which of them was the more lover-like ? Dr. Middleton would for the moment have supposed his daughter.

Clara said : ‘ Shall you be on the lawn, papa ? ’

Willoughby interposed. ‘ Stay, sir ; give us your blessing.’

‘ That you have.’ Dr. Middleton hastily motioned the paternal ceremony in outline.

‘ A few minutes, papa,’ said Clara.

‘ Will she name the day ? ’ came eagerly from Willoughby.

‘ I cannot ! ’ Clara cried in extremity.

‘ The day is important on its arrival,’ said her father, ‘ but I apprehend the decision to be of the chief importance at present. First prime your piece of artillery, my friend.’

‘ The decision is taken, sir.’

‘Then I will be out of the way of the firing. Hit what day you please.’

Clara checked herself on an impetuous exclamation. It was done that her father might not be detained.

Her astute self-compression sharpened Willoughby as much as it mortified and terrified him. He understood how he would stand in an instant were Dr. Middleton absent. Her father was the tribunal she dreaded, and affairs must be settled and made irrevocable while he was with them. To sting the blood of the girl, he called her his darling, and half enwound her, shadowing forth a salute.

She strung her body to submit, seeing her father take it as a signal for his immediate retirement.

Willoughby was upon him before he reached the door.

‘Hear us out, sir. Do not go. Stay, at my entreaty. I fear we have not come to a perfect reconciliation.’

‘If that is your opinion,’ said Clara, ‘it is good reason for not distressing my father.’

‘Dr. Middleton, I love your daughter. I wooed her and won her ; I had your consent to our union, and I was the happiest of mankind. In some way, since her coming to my house, I know not how—she will not tell me, or cannot—I offended. One may be innocent and offend. I have never pretended to impeccability, which is an admission that I may very naturally offend. My appeal to her is for an explanation or for pardon. I obtain neither. Had our positions been reversed, Oh ! not for any real offence—not for the worst that can be imagined—I think not—I hope not—could I have been tempted to propose the dissolution of our engagement. To love is to love, with me ; an engagement a solemn bond. With all my errors I have that merit of utter fidelity—to the world laughable ! I confess to a multitude of errors ; I have that single merit, and am not the more

estimable in your daughter's eyes on account of it, I fear. In plain words, I am, I do not doubt, one of the fools among men ; of the description of human dog commonly known as faithful—whose destiny is that of a tribe. A man who cries out when he is hurt is absurd, and I am not asking for sympathy. Call me luckless. But I abhor a breach of faith. A broken pledge is hateful to me. I should regard it in myself as a form of suicide. There are principles which civilized men must contend for. Our social fabric is based on them. As my word stands for me, I hold others to theirs. If that is not done, the world is more or less a carnival of counterfeits. In this instance—Ah ! Clara, my love ! and you have principles : you have inherited, you have been indoctrinated with them : have I, then, in my ignorance offended past penitence, that you, of all women ? . . . And without being able to name my sin !—Not only for what I lose by it, but in the abstract, judicially—apart from the sentiment of personal interest, grief, pain, and the possibility of my having to endure that which no temptation would induce me to commit :—judicially ;—I fear, sir, I am a poor forensic orator . . .

‘The situation, sir, does not demand a Cicero : proceed,’ said Dr. Middleton, barked in his approving nods at the right true things delivered.

‘Judicially, I am bold to say, though it may appear a presumption in one suffering acutely, I abhor a breach of faith.’

Dr. Middleton brought his nod down low upon the phrase he had anticipated. ‘And I,’ said he, ‘personally, and presently, abhor a breach of faith. Judicially ? Judicially to examine, judicially to condemn : but does the judicial mind detest ? I think, sir, we are not on the Bench when we say that we abhor : we have unseated ourselves. Yet our abhorrence of bad conduct is very

certain. You would signify, impersonally : which suffices for this exposition of your feelings.'

He peered at the gentleman under his brows, and resumed : 'She has had it, Willoughby ; she has had it plain Saxon and in uncompromising Olympian. There is, I conceive, no necessity to revert to it.'

'Pardon me, sir, but I am still unforgiven.'

'You must babble out the rest between you. I am about as much at home as a turkey with a pair of pigeons.'

'Leave us, father,' said Clara.

'First join our hands, and let me give you that title, sir.'

'Reach the good man your hand, my girl ; forthright, from the shoulder, like a brave boxer. Humour a lover. He asks for his own.'

'It is more than I can do, father.'

'How, it is more than you can do ? You are engaged to him, a plighted woman.'

'I do not wish to marry.'

'The apology is inadequate.'

'I am unworthy . . .'

'Chatter ! chatter !'

'I beg him to release me.'

'Lunacy !'

'I have no love to give him.'

'Have you gone back to your cradle, Clara Middleton ?'

'Oh ! leave us, dear father.'

'My offence, Clara, my offence ! What is it ? Will you only name it ?'

'Father, will you leave us ? We can better speak together . . .'

'We have spoken, Clara, how often !' Willoughby resumed, 'with what result ?—that you loved me, that you have ceased to love me : that your heart was mine, that you have withdrawn it, plucked it from me : that you request me to consent to a sacrifice involving my

reputation, my life. And what have I done ? I am the same, unchangeable. I loved and love you : my heart was yours, and is, and will be yours for ever. You are my affianced—that is, my wife. What have I done ? ’

‘ It is indeed useless,’ Clara sighed.

‘ Not useless, my girl, that you should inform this gentleman, your affianced husband, of the ground of the objection you conceived against him.’

‘ I cannot say.’

‘ Do you know ? ’

‘ If I could name it, I could hope to overcome it.’

Dr. Middleton addressed Sir Willoughby.

‘ I verily believe we are directing the girl to dissect a caprice. Such things are seen large by these young people, but as they have neither organs nor arteries, nor brains, nor membranes, dissection and inspection will be alike profitlessly practised. Your inquiry is natural for a lover, whose passion to enter into relations with the sex is ordinarily in proportion to his ignorance of the stuff composing them. At a particular age they traffic in whims : which are, I presume, the spiritual of hysterics ; and are indubitably preferable, so long as they are not pushed too far. Examples are not wanting to prove that a flighty initiative on the part of the male is a handsome corrective. In that case, we should probably have had the roof off the house, and the girl now at your feet. Ha ! ’

‘ Despise me, father. I am punished for ever thinking myself the superior of any woman,’ said Clara.

‘ Your hand out to him, my dear, since he is for a formal reconciliation : and I can’t wonder.’

‘ Father ! I have said I do not . . . I have said I cannot . . . ’

‘ By the most merciful ! what ? what ? the name for it ! words for it ! ’

‘Do not frown on me, father. I wish him happiness. I cannot marry him. I do not love him.’

‘You will remember that you informed me aforetime that you did love him.’

‘I was ignorant . . . I did not know myself. I wish him to be happy.’

‘You deny him the happiness you wish him!’

‘It would not be for his happiness were I to wed him.’

‘Oh!’ burst from Willoughby.

‘You hear him. He rejects your prediction, Clara Middleton.’

She caught her clasped hands up to her throat. ‘Wretched, wretched, both!’

‘And you have not a word against him, miserable girl!’

‘Miserable! I am.’

‘It is the cry of an animal!’

‘Yes, father.’

‘You feel like one? Your behaviour is of that shape. You have not a word?’

‘Against myself: not against him.’

‘And I, when you speak so generously, am to yield you? give you up?’ cried Willoughby. ‘Ah! my love, my Clara, impose what you will on me; not that. It is too much for man. It is, I swear it, beyond my strength.’

‘Pursue, continue the strain: ’tis in the right key,’ said Dr. Middleton, departing.

Willoughby wheeled and waylaid him with a bound.

‘Plead for me, sir; you are all-powerful. Let her be mine, she shall be happy, or I will perish for it. I will call it on my head.—Impossible! I cannot lose her. Lose you, my love? It would be to strip myself of every blessing of body and soul. It would be to deny myself possession of grace, beauty, wit, all the incomparable charms of loveliness of mind and person in

woman, and plant myself in a desert. You are my mate, the sum of everything I call mine. Clara, I should be less than man to submit to such a loss. Consent to it? But I love you! I worship you! How can I consent to lose you . . . ?'

He saw the eyes of the desperately wily young woman slink sideways. Dr. Middleton was pacing at ever shorter lengths closer by the door.

'You hate me?' Willoughby sank his voice.

'If it should turn to hate!' she murmured.

'Hatred of your husband?'

'I could not promise,' she murmured more softly in her wiliness.

'Hatred?' he cried aloud, and Dr. Middleton stopped in his walk and flung up his head; 'Hatred of your husband? of the man you have vowed to love and honour? Oh! no. Once mine, it is not to be feared. I trust to my knowledge of your nature; I trust in your blood, I trust in your education. Had I nothing else to inspire confidence, I could trust in your eyes. And Clara, take the confession: I would rather be hated than lose you. For if I lose you, you are in another world, out of this one holding me in its death-like cold: but if you hate me, we are together, we are still together. Any alliance, any, in preference to separation!'

Clara listened with a critical ear. His language and tone were new; and comprehending that they were in part addressed to her father, whose phrase: 'A breach of faith': he had so cunningly used, disdain of the actor prompted the extreme blunder of her saying—frigidly though she said it:

'You have not talked to me in this way before.'

'Finally,' remarked her father, summing up the situation to settle it from that little speech, 'he talks to you in this way now; and you are under my injunction to

stretch your hand out to him for a symbol of union, or to state your objection to that course. He, by your admission, is at the terminus, and there, failing the why not, must you join him.'

Her head whirled. She had been severely flagellated and weakened previous to Willoughby's entrance. Language to express her peculiar repulsion eluded her. She formed the words, and perceived that they would not stand to bear a breath from her father. She perceived too that Willoughby was as ready with his agony of supplication as she with hers. If she had tears for a resource, he had gestures, quite as eloquent; and a cry of her loathing of the union would fetch a countervailing torrent of the man's love.—What could she say? he is an Egoist? The epithet has no meaning in such a scene. *Invent!* shrieked the hundred-voiced instinct of dislike within her, and alone with her father, alone with Willoughby, she could have invented some equivalent, to do her heart justice for the injury it sustained in her being unable to name the true and immense objection: but the pair in presence paralyzed her. She dramatized them each springing forward by turns, with crushing rejoinders. The activity of her mind revelled in giving them a tongue, but would not do it for herself. Then ensued the inevitable consequence of an incapacity to speak at the heart's urgent dictate: heart and mind became divided. One throbbed hotly, the other hung aloof; and mentally, while the sick inarticulate heart kept clamouring, she answered it with all that she imagined for those two men to say. And she dropped poison on it to still its reproaches: bidding herself remember her fatal postponements in order to preserve the seeming of consistency before her father; calling it hypocrite; asking herself, what was she! who loved her! And thus beating down her heart, she completed the mischief with a

piercing view of the foundation of her father's advocacy of Willoughby, and more lamentably asked herself what her value was, if she stood bereft of respect for her father.

Reason, on the other hand, was animated by her better nature to plead his case against her : she clung to her respect for him, and felt herself drowning with it : and she echoed Willoughby consciously, doubling her horror with the consciousness, in crying out on a world where the most sacred feelings are subject to such lapses. It doubled her horror, that she should echo the man ; but it proved that she was no better than he : only some years younger. Those years would soon be outlived : after which, he and she would be of a pattern. She was unloved : she did no harm to any one by keeping her word to this man : she had pledged it, and it would be a breach of faith not to keep it. No one loved her. Behold the quality of her father's love ! To give him happiness was now the principal aim for her, her own happiness being decently buried ; and here he was happy : why should she be the cause of his going and losing the poor pleasure he so much enjoyed ?

The idea of her devotedness flattered her feebleness. She betrayed signs of hesitation ; and in hesitating, she looked away from a look at Willoughby, thinking (so much against her nature was it to resign herself to him) that it would not have been so difficult with an ill-favoured man. With one horribly ugly, it would have been a horrible exultation to cast off her youth and take the fiendish leap.

Unfortunately for Sir Willoughby, he had his reasons for pressing impatience ; and seeing her deliberate, seeing her hasty look at his fine figure, his opinion of himself combined with his recollection of a particular maxim of the Great Book to assure him that her resistance was

over : chiefly owing, as he supposed, to his physical perfections.

Frequently indeed, in the contest between gentlemen and ladies, have the maxims of the Book stimulated the assailant to victory. They are rosy with blood of victims. To hear them is to hear a horn that blows the mort : has blown it a thousand times. It is good to remember how often they have succeeded, when, for the benefit of some future Lady Vauban, who may bestir her wits to gather maxims for the inspiring of the Defence, the circumstance of a failure has to be recorded.

Willoughby could not wait for the melting of the snows. He saw full surely the dissolving process ; and sincerely admiring and coveting her as he did, rashly this ill-fated gentleman attempted to precipitate it, and so doing arrested.

Whence might we draw a note upon yonder maxim, in words akin to these : Make certain ere a breath come from thee that thou be not a frost.

‘ Mine ! She is mine ! ’ he cried : ‘ mine once more ! mine utterly ! mine eternally ! ’ and he followed up his devouring exclamations in person as she, less decidedly, retreated. She retreated as young ladies should ever do, two or three steps, and he would not notice that she had become an angry Dian, all arrows : her maidenliness in surrendering pleased him. Grasping one fair hand, he just allowed her to edge away from his embrace, crying : ‘ Not a syllable of what I have gone through ! You shall not have to explain it, my Clara. I will study you more diligently, to be guided by you, my darling. If I offend again, my wife will not find it hard to speak what my bride withheld—I do not ask why : perhaps not able to weigh the effect of her reticence : not at that time, when she was younger and less experienced, estimating the sacredness of a plighted engagement. It is past, we

are one, my dear sir and father. You may leave us now.'

'I profoundly rejoice to hear that I may,' said Dr. Middleton.

Clara writhed her captured hand.

'No, papa, stay. It is an error, an error. You must not leave me. Do not think me utterly, eternally, belonging to any one but you. No one shall say I am his but you.'

'Are you quicksands, Clara Middleton, that nothing can be built on you? Whither is a flighty head and a shifty will carrying the girl?'

'Clara and I, sir,' said Willoughby.

'And so you shall,' said the Doctor, turning about.

'Not yet, papa': Clara sprang to him.

'Why, you, you, you, it was you who craved to be alone with Willoughby!' her father shouted; 'and here we are rounded to our starting-point, with the solitary difference that now you do not want to be alone with Willoughby. First I am bidden go; next I am pulled back; and judging by collar and coat-tail, I suspect you to be a young woman to wear an angel's temper thread-bare before you determine upon which one of the tides driving him to and fro you intend to launch on yourself. Where is your mind?'

Clara smoothed her forehead.

'I wish to please you, papa.'

'I request you to please the gentleman who is your appointed husband.'

'I am anxious to perform my duty.'

'That should be a satisfactory basis for you, Willoughby;—as girls go!'

'Let me, sir, simply entreat to have her hand in mine before you.'

'Why not, Clara?'

Why an empty ceremony, papa?'

‘The implication is, that she is prepared for the important one, friend Willoughby.’

‘Her hand, sir; the reassurance of her hand in mine under your eyes :—after all that I have suffered, I claim it, I think I claim it reasonably, to restore me to confidence.’

‘Quite reasonably; which is not to say, necessarily; but, I will add, justifiably; and it may be, sagaciously, when dealing with the volatile.’

‘And here,’ said Willoughby, ‘is my hand.’

Clara recoiled.

He stepped on. Her father frowned. She lifted both her hands from the shrinking elbows, darted a look of repulsion at her pursuer, and ran to her father, crying : ‘Call it my mood! I am volatile, capricious, flighty, very foolish. But you see that I attach a real meaning to it, and feel it to be binding : I cannot think it an empty ceremony, if it is before you. Yes, only be a little considerate to your moody girl. She will be in a fitter state in a few hours. Spare me this moment; I must collect myself. I thought I was free; I thought he would not press me. If I give my hand hurriedly now, I shall, I know, immediately repent it. There is the picture of me! But, papa, I mean to try to be above that, and if I go and walk by myself, I shall grow calm to perceive where my duty lies . . .’

‘In which direction shall you walk?’ said Willoughby.

‘Wisdom is not upon a particular road,’ said Dr. Middleton.

‘I have a dread, sir, of that one which leads to the railway-station.’

‘With some justice!’ Dr. Middleton sighed over his daughter.

Clara coloured to deep crimson : but she was beyond anger, and was rather gratified by an offence coming from Willoughby.

‘ I will promise not to leave his grounds, papa.’

‘ My child, you have threatened to be a breaker of promises.’

‘ Oh ! ’ she wailed. ‘ But I will make it a vow to you.’

‘ Why not make it a vow to me this moment, for this gentleman’s contentment, that he shall be your husband within a given period ! ’

‘ I will come to you voluntarily. I burn to be alone.’

‘ I shall lose her ! ’ exclaimed Willoughby in heartfelt earnest.

‘ How so ? ’ said Dr. Middleton. ‘ I have her, sir, if you will favour me by continuing in abeyance.—You will come within an hour voluntarily, Clara : and you will either at once yield your hand to him, or you will furnish reasons, and they must be good ones, for withholding it.’

‘ Yes, papa.’

‘ You will ? ’

‘ I will.’

‘ Mind, I say *reasons*.’

‘ Reasons, papa. If I have none . . . ’

‘ If you have none that are to my satisfaction, you implicitly, and instantly, and cordially obey my command.’

‘ I will obey.’

‘ What more would you require ? ’ Dr. Middleton bowed to Sir Willoughby in triumph.

‘ Will she . . . ’

‘ Sir ! Sir ! ’

‘ She is your daughter, sir. I am satisfied.’

‘ She has perchance wrestled with her engagement, as the aborigines of a land newly discovered by a crew of adventurous colonists do battle with the garments imposed on them by our considerate civilization ;—ultimately to rejoice with excessive dignity in the wearing of a battered cocked-hat and trowsers not extending to the shanks : but she did not break her engagement, sir ; and

we will anticipate, that moderating a young woman's native wildness, she may, after the manner of my comparison, take a similar pride in her fortune in good season.'

Willoughby had not leisure to sound the depth of Dr. Middleton's compliment. He had seen Clara gliding out of the room during the delivery ; and his fear returned on him that, not being won, she was lost.

'She has gone'; her father noticed her absence. 'She does not waste time in the mission to procure that astonishing product of a shallow soil, her reasons; if such be the object of her search. But no: it signifies that she deems herself to have need of composure—nothing more. No one likes to be turned about; we like to turn ourselves about: and in the question of an act to be committed, we stipulate that it shall be our act—girls and others. After the lapse of an hour, it will appear to her as her act.—Happily, Willoughby, we do not dine away from Patterne to-night.'

'No, sir.'

'It may be attributable to a sense of deserving, but I could plead guilty to a weakness for old Port to-day.'

'There shall be an extra-bottle, sir.'

'All going favourably with you, as I have no cause to doubt,' said Dr. Middleton, with the motion of wafting his host out of the library.

CHAPTER XLII

SHOWS THE DIVINING ARTS OF A PERCEPTIVE MIND

STARTING from the Hall, a few minutes before Dr. Middleton and Sir Willoughby had entered the drawing-room overnight, Vernon parted company with Colonel De Craye at the park-gates, and betook himself to the cottage

of the Dales, where nothing had been heard of his wanderer ; and he received the same disappointing reply from Dr. Corney, out of the bed-room window of the genial physician, whose astonishment at his covering so long a stretch of road at night for news of a boy like Crossjay—gifted with the lives of a cat—became violent and rapped Punch-like blows on the window-sill at Vernon's refusal to take shelter and rest. Vernon's excuse was that he had ' no one but that fellow to care for,' and he strode off, naming a farm five miles distant. Dr. Corney howled an invitation to early breakfast to him, in the event of his passing on his way back, and retired to bed to think of him. The result of a variety of conjectures caused him to set Vernon down as Miss Middleton's knight, and he felt a strong compassion for his poor friend. ' Though,' thought he, ' a hopeless attachment is as pretty an accompaniment to the tune of life as a gentleman might wish to have, for it's one of those big doses of discord which make all the minor ones fit in like an agreeable harmony, and so he shuffles along as pleasantly as the fortune-favoured, when they come to compute ! '

Sir Willoughby was the fortune-favoured in the little doctor's mind ; that high-stepping gentleman having wealth, and public consideration, and the most ravishing young lady in the world for a bride. Still, though he reckoned all these advantages enjoyed by Sir Willoughby at their full value, he could imagine the ultimate balance of good fortune to be in favour of Vernon. But to do so, he had to reduce the whole calculation to the extreme abstract, and feed his lean friend, as it were, on dew and roots ; and the happy effect for Vernon lay in a distant future, on the borders of old age, where he was to be blest with his lady's regretful preference, and rejoice in the fruits of good constitutional habits. The reviewing mind was Irish. Sir Willoughby was a character of man

profoundly opposed to Dr. Corney's nature ; the latter's instincts bristled with antagonism—not to his race, for Vernon was of the same race, partly of the same blood, and Corney loved him : the type of person was the annoyance. And the circumstance of its prevailing successfulness in the country where he was placed, while it held him silent as if under a law, heaped stores of insurgency in the Celtic bosom. Corney contemplating Sir Wiloughby, and a trotting kern governed by Strongbow, have a point of likeness between them ; with the point of difference, that Corney was enlightened to know of a friend better adapted for eminent station, and especially better adapted to please a lovely lady—could these high-bred Englishwomen but be taught to conceive another idea of manliness than the formal carved-in-wood idol of their national worship !

Dr. Corney breakfasted very early, without seeing Vernon. He was off to a patient while the first lark of the morning carolled above, and the business of the day not yet fallen upon men in the shape of cloud, was happily intermixed with nature's hues and pipings. Turning off the highroad up a green lane, an hour later, he beheld a youngster prying into a hedge head and arms, by the peculiar strenuous twist of whose hinder parts, indicative of a frame plunged on the pursuit in hand, he clearly distinguished young Crossjay. Out came eggs. The doctor pulled up.

‘What bird ?’ he bellowed.

‘Yellowhammer,’ Crossjay yelled back.

‘Now, sir, you'll drop a couple of those eggs in the nest.’

‘Don't order me,’ Crossjay was retorting : ‘Oh ! it's you, Dr. Corney. Good morning. I said that, because I always do drop a couple back. I promised Mr. Whitford I would, and Miss Middleton too.’

‘Had breakfast?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Not hungry?’

‘I should be if I thought about it.’

‘Jump up.’

‘I think I’d rather not, Dr. Corney.’

‘And you’ll just do what Dr. Corney tells you; and set your mind on rashers of curly fat bacon and sweetly-smoking coffee, toast, hot cakes, marmalade and damson-jam. Wide go the fellow’s nostrils, and there’s water at the dimples of his mouth! Up, my man.’

Crossjay jumped up beside the doctor, who remarked, as he touched his horse: ‘I don’t want a man this morning, though I’ll enlist you in my service if I do. You’re fond of Miss Middleton?’

Instead of answering, Crossjay heaved the sigh of love that bears a burden.

‘And so am I,’ pursued the doctor: ‘You’ll have to put up with a rival. It’s worse than fond: I’m in love with her. How do you like that?’

‘I don’t mind how many *love* her,’ said Crossjay.

‘You’re worthy of a gratuitous breakfast in the front parlour of the best hotel of the place they call Arcadia. And how about your bed last night?’

‘Pretty middling.’

‘Hard, was it, where the bones haven’t cushion?’

‘I don’t care for bed. A couple of hours, and that’s enough for me.’

‘But you’re fond of Miss Middleton anyhow, and that’s a virtue.’

To his great surprise, Dr. Corney beheld two big round tears force their way out of this tough youngster’s eyes, and all the while the boy’s face was proud.

Crossjay said, when he could trust himself to disjoin his lips: ‘I want to see Mr. Whitford.’

‘ Have you got news for him ? ’

‘ I ’ve something to ask him. It ’s about what I ought to do.’

‘ Then, my boy, you have the right name addressed in the wrong direction : for I found you turning your shoulders on Mr. Whitford. And he has been out of his bed, hunting you all the unholy night you ’ve made it for him. That ’s melancholy. What do you say to asking my advice ? ’

Crossjay sighed. ‘ I can’t speak to anybody but Mr. Whitford.’

‘ And you ’re hot to speak to him ? ’

‘ I want to.’

‘ And I found you running away from him. You ’re a curiosity, Mr. Crossjay Patterne.’

‘ Ah ! so ’d anybody be who knew as much as I do,’ said Crossjay, with a sober sadness that caused the doctor to treat him seriously.

‘ The fact is,’ he said, ‘ Mr. Whitford is beating the country for you. My best plan will be to drive you to the Hall.’

‘ I ’d rather not go to the Hall,’ Crossjay spoke resolutely.

‘ You won’t see Miss Middleton anywhere but at the Hall.’

‘ I don’t want to see Miss Middleton, if I can’t be a bit of use to her.’

‘ No danger threatening the lady, is there ? ’

Crossjay treated the question as if it had not been put.

‘ Now, tell me,’ said Dr. Corney, ‘ would there be a chance for me, supposing Miss Middleton were disengaged ? ’

The answer was easy. ‘ I ’m sure she wouldn’t.’

‘ And why, sir, are you so cock sure ? ’

There was no saying ; but the doctor pressed for it,

and at last Crossjay gave his opinion that she would take Mr. Whitford.

The doctor asked why ; and Crossjay said it was because Mr. Whitford was the best man in the world. To which, with a lusty 'Amen to that,' Dr. Corney remarked : 'I should have fancied Colonel De Craye would have had the first chance : he's more of a lady's man.'

Crossjay surprised him again by petulantly saying : 'Don't.'

The boy added : 'I don't want to talk, except about birds and things. What a jolly morning it is ! I saw the sun rise. No rain to-day. You're right about hungry, Dr. Corney !'

The kindly little man swung his whip. Crossjay informed him of his disgrace at the Hall, and of every incident connected with it, from the tramp to the baronet, save Miss Middleton's adventure, and the night-scene in the drawing-room. A strong smell of something left out struck Dr. Corney, and he said : 'You'll not let Miss Middleton know of my affection. After all, it's only a little bit of love. But, as Patrick said to Kathleen, when she owned to such a little bit, "that's the best bit of all!" and he was as right as I am about hungry.'

Crossjay scorned to talk of loving, he declared. 'I never tell Miss Middleton what I feel. Why, there's Miss Dale's cottage !'

'It's nearer to your empty inside than my mansion,' said the doctor, 'and we'll stop just to inquire whether a bed's to be had for you there to-night, and if not, I'll have you with me, and bottle you and exhibit you, for you're a rare specimen. Breakfast, you may count on, from Mr. Dale. I spy a gentleman.'

'It's Colonel De Craye.'

‘Come after news of you.’

‘I wonder!’

‘Miss Middleton sends him; of course she does.’

Crossjay turned his full face to the doctor. ‘I haven’t seen her for such a long time! But he saw me last night, and he might have told her that, if she’s anxious.— Good morning, colonel. I’ve had a good walk and a capital drive, and I’m as hungry as the boat’s crew of Captain Bligh.’

He jumped down.

The colonel and the doctor saluted smiling.

‘I’ve rung the bell,’ said De Craye.

A maid came to the gate, and upon her steps appeared Miss Dale, who flung herself at Crossjay, mingling kisses and reproaches. She scarcely raised her face to the colonel more than to reply to his greeting, and excuse the hungry boy for hurrying indoors to breakfast.

‘I’ll wait,’ said De Craye. He had seen that she was paler than usual. So had Dr. Corney; and the doctor called to her concerning her father’s health. She reported that he had not yet risen, and took Crossjay to herself.

‘That’s well,’ said the doctor, ‘if the invalid sleeps long. The lady is not looking so well, though. But ladies vary; they show the mind on the countenance, for want of the punching we meet with to conceal it; they’re like military flags for a funeral or a gala; one day furled, and next day streaming. Men are ships’ figure-heads, about the same for a storm or a calm, and not too handsome, thanks to the ocean. It’s an age since we encountered last, colonel: on board the Dublin boat, I recollect, and a night it was.’

‘I recollect that you set me on my legs, doctor.’

‘Ah, and you’ll please to notify that Corney’s no quack at sea, by favour of the monks of the Chartreuse, whose

elixir has power to still the waves. And we hear that miracles are done with ! ’

‘ Roll a physician and a monk together, doctor ! ’

‘ True : it ’ll be a miracle if they combine. Though the cure of the soul is often the entire and total cure of the body : and it ’s maliciously said, that the body given over to our treatment is a signal to set the soul flying. By the way, colonel, that boy has a trifle on his mind.’

‘ I suppose he has been worrying a farmer or a game-keeper.’

‘ Try him. You ’ll find him tight. He ’s got Miss Middleton on the brain. There ’s a bit of a secret ; and he ’s not so cheerful about it.’

‘ We ’ll see,’ said the colonel.

Dr. Corney nodded. ‘ I have to visit my patient here presently. I ’m too early for him : so I ’ll make a call or two on the lame birds that are up,’ he remarked, and drove away.

De Craye strolled through the garden. He was a gentleman of those actively perceptive wits which, if ever they reflect, do so by hops and jumps : upon some dancing mirror within, we may fancy. He penetrated a plot in a flash ; and in a flash he formed one ; but in both cases, it was after long hovering and not over-eager deliberation, by the patient exercise of his quick percepts. The fact that Crossjay was considered to have Miss Middleton on the brain, threw a series of images of everything relating to Crossjay for the last forty hours into relief before him : and as he did not in the slightest degree speculate on any one of them, but merely shifted and surveyed them, the falcon that he was in spirit as well as in his handsome face leisurely allowed his instinct to direct him where to strike. A reflective disposition has this danger in action, that it commonly precipitates conjecture for the purpose of working upon probabilities

with the methods and in the tracks to which it is accustomed : and to conjecture rashly is to play into the puzzles of the maze. He who can watch circling above it awhile, quietly viewing, and collecting in his eye, gathers matter that makes the secret thing discourse to the brain by weight and balance ; he will get either the right clue or none ; more frequently none ; but he will escape the entanglement of his own cleverness, he will always be nearer to the enigma than the guesser or the calculator, and he will retain a breadth of vision forfeited by them. He must, however, to have his chance of success, be acutely besides calmly perceptive, a reader of features, audacious at the proper moment.

De Craye wished to look at Miss Dale. She had returned home very suddenly, not, as it appeared, owing to her father's illness : and he remembered a redness of her eyelids when he passed her on the corridor one night. She sent Crossjay out to him as soon as the boy was well filled. He sent Crossjay back with a request. She did not yield to it immediately. She stepped to the front door reluctantly, and seemed disconcerted. De Craye begged for a message to Miss Middleton. There was none to give. He persisted. But there was really none at present, she said.

‘ You won’t entrust me with the smallest word ? ’ said he, and set her visibly thinking whether she could despatch a word. She could not ; she had no heart for messages.

‘ I shall see her in a day or two, Colonel De Craye.’

‘ She will miss you severely.’

‘ We shall soon meet.’

‘ And poor Willoughby ! ’

Lætitia coloured and stood silent.

A butterfly of some rarity allured Crossjay.

‘ I fear he has been doing mischief,’ she said. ‘ I cannot get him to look at me.’

‘ His appetite is good ? ’

‘ Very good indeed. ’

De Craye nodded. A boy with a noble appetite is never a hopeless lock.

The colonel and Crossjay lounged over the garden.

‘ And now, ’ said the colonel, ‘ we ’ll see if we can’t arrange a meeting between you and Miss Middleton. You ’re a lucky fellow, for she ’s always thinking of you. ’

‘ I know I ’m always thinking of her, ’ said Crossjay.

‘ If ever you ’re in a scrape, she ’s the person you must go to. ’

‘ Yes, if I know where she is ! ’

‘ Why, generally she ’ll be at the Hall. ’

There was no reply : Crossjay’s dreadful secret jumped to his throat. He certainly was a weaker lock for being full of breakfast.

‘ I want to see Mr. Whitford so much, ’ he said.

‘ Something to tell him ? ’

‘ I don’t know what to do : I don’t understand it ! ’ The secret wriggled to his mouth. He swallowed it down : ‘ Yes, I want to talk to Mr. Whitford. ’

‘ He ’s another of Miss Middleton’s friends. ’

‘ I know he is. He ’s true steel. ’

‘ We ’re all her friends, Crossjay. I flatter myself I ’m a Toledo when I ’m wanted. How long had you been in the house last night before you ran into me ? ’

‘ I don’t know, sir : I fell asleep for some time, and then I woke . . . ! ’

‘ Where did you find yourself ? ’

‘ I was in the drawing-room. ’

‘ Come, Crossjay, you ’re not a fellow to be scared by ghosts ? You looked it when you made a dash at my midriff. ’

‘ I don’t believe there are such things. Do you, colonel ? You can’t ! ’

‘There’s no saying. We’ll hope not; for it wouldn’t be fair fighting. A man with a ghost to back him’d beat any ten. We couldn’t box him, or play cards, or stand a chance with him as a rival in love. Did you, now, catch a sight of a ghost?’

‘They weren’t ghosts!’ Crossjay said what he was sure of, and his voice pronounced his conviction.

‘I doubt whether Miss Middleton is particularly happy,’ remarked the colonel. ‘Why? Why, you upset her, you know, now and then.’

The boy swelled. ‘I’d do . . . I’d go . . . I wouldn’t have her unhappy . . . It’s that! that’s it! And I don’t know what I ought to do. I wish I could see Mr. Whitford.’

‘You get into such headlong scrapes, my lad.’

‘I wasn’t in any scrape yesterday.’

‘So you made yourself up a comfortable bed in the drawing-room? Lucky Sir Willoughby didn’t see you.’

‘He didn’t, though!’

‘A close shave, was it?’

‘I was under a cover of something silk.’

‘He woke you?’

‘I suppose he did. I heard him.’

‘Talking?’

‘He was talking.’

‘What! talking to himself?’

‘No.’

The secret threatened Crossjay to be out or suffocate him.

De Craye gave him a respite.

‘You like Sir Willoughby, don’t you?’

Crossjay produced a still-born affirmative.

‘He’s kind to you,’ said the colonel; ‘he’ll set you up and look after your interests.’

‘Yes, I like him,’ said Crossjay, with his customary

rapidity in touching the subject ; ' I like him ; he 's kind, and all that, and tips and plays with you, and all that ; but I never can make out why he wouldn't see my father when my father came here to see him ten miles, and had to walk back ten miles in the rain, to go by rail a long way, down home, as far as Devonport, because Sir Willoughby wouldn't see him, though he was at home, my father saw. We all thought it so odd : and my father wouldn't let us talk much about it. My father 's a very brave man.'

' Captain Patterne is as brave a man as ever lived,' said De Craye.

' I 'm positive you 'd like him, colonel.'

' I know of his deeds, and I admire him, and that 's a good step to liking.'

He warmed the boy's thoughts of his father.

' Because, what they say at home is, a little bread and cheese, and a glass of ale, and a rest, to a poor man—lots of great houses will give you that, and we wouldn't have asked for more than that. My sisters say they think Sir Willoughby must be selfish. He 's awfully proud ; and perhaps it was because my father wasn't dressed well enough. But what can we do ? We 're very poor at home, and lots of us, and all hungry. My father says he isn't paid very well for his services to the Government. He 's only a marine.'

' He 's a hero ! ' said De Craye.

' He came home, very tired with a cold, and had a doctor. But Sir Willoughby did send him money, and mother wished to send it back, and my father said she was not like a woman—with our big family. He said he thought Sir Willoughby an extraordinary man.'

' Not at all ; very common ; indigenous,' said De Craye. ' The art of cutting, is one of the branches of a polite education in this country, and you 'll have to learn it, if

you expect to be looked on as a gentleman and a Patterne, my boy. I begin to see how it is Miss Middleton takes to you so. Follow her directions. But I hope you did not listen to a private conversation. Miss Middleton would not approve of that.'

'Colonel De Craye, how could I help myself? I heard a lot before I knew what it was. There was poetry!'

'Still, Crossjay, if it was important!—was it?'

The boy swelled again, and the colonel asked him: 'Does Miss Dale know of your having played listener?'

'She!' said Crossjay. 'Oh! I couldn't tell *her*.'

He breathed thick: then came a threat of tears. 'She wouldn't do anything to hurt Miss Middleton. I'm sure of that. It wasn't her fault. She—there goes Mr. Whitford!' Crossjay bounded away.

The colonel had no inclination to wait for his return. He walked fast up the road, not perspicuously conscious that his motive was to be well in advance of Vernon Whitford: to whom after all, the knowledge imparted by Crossjay would be of small advantage. That fellow would probably trot off to Willoughby to row him for breaking his word to Miss Middleton! There are men, thought De Craye, who see nothing, feel nothing.

He crossed a stile into the wood above the lake, where, as he was in the humour to think himself signally lucky, espying her, he took it as a matter of course that the lady who taught his heart to leap should be posted by the Fates. And he wondered little at her power, for rarely had the world seen such union of princess and sylph as in that lady's figure. She stood holding by a beech-branch, gazing down on the water.

She had not heard him. When she looked she flushed at the spectacle of one of her thousand thoughts, but she was not startled; the colour overflowed a grave face.

'And 'tis not quite the first time that Willoughby has

played this trick ! ' De Craye said to her, keenly smiling with a parted mouth.

Clara moved her lips to recall remarks introductory to so abrupt and strange a plunge.

He smiled in that peculiar manner of an illuminated comic perception : for the moment he was all falcon ; and he surprised himself more than Clara, who was not in the mood to take surprises. It was the sight of her which had animated him to strike his game ; he was down on it.

Another instinct at work (they spring up in twenties oftener than in twos when the heart is the hunter) prompted him to directness and quickness, to carry her on the flood of the discovery.

She regained something of her mental self-possession as soon as she was on a level with a meaning she had not yet inspected ; but she had to submit to his lead, distinctly perceiving where its drift divided to the forked currents of what might be in his mind and what was in hers.

' Miss Middleton, I bear a bit of a likeness to the messenger to the glorious despot—my head is off if I speak not true ! Everything I have is on the die. Did I guess wrong your wish ?—I read it in the dark, by the heart. But here 's a certainty : Willoughby sets you free.'

' You have come from him ? ' she could imagine nothing else, and she was unable to preserve a disguise ; she trembled.

' From Miss Dale.'

' Ah ! ' Clara drooped : ' she told me that once.'

' 'Tis the fact that tells it now.'

' You have not seen him since you left the house ? '

' Darkly : clear enough : not unlike the hand of destiny—through a veil. He offered himself to Miss Dale last night, about between the witching hours of twelve and one.'

‘ Miss Dale . . . ? ’

‘ Would she other ? Could she ? The poor lady has languished beyond a decade. She ’s love in the feminine person.’

‘ Are you speaking seriously, Colonel De Craye ? ’

‘ Would I dare to trifle with you, Miss Middleton ? ’

‘ I have reason to know it cannot be.’

‘ If I have a head, it is a fresh and blooming truth. And more—I stake my vanity on it ! ’

‘ Let me go to her.’ She stepped.

‘ Consider,’ said he.

‘ Miss Dale and I are excellent friends. It would not seem indelicate to her. She has a kind of regard for me, through Crossjay.—Oh ! can it be ? There must be some delusion. You have seen—you wish to be of service to me ; you may too easily be deceived. Last night ?—he last night . . . ? And this morning ! ’

‘ ’Tis not the first time our friend has played the trick, Miss Middleton.’

‘ But this is incredible : that last night . . . and this morning, in my father’s presence, he presses ! . . . You have seen Miss Dale ?—Everything is possible of him : they were together, I know. Colonel De Craye, I have not the slightest chance of concealment with you. I think I felt that when I first saw you. Will you let me hear why you are so certain ? ’

‘ Miss Middleton, when I first had the honour of looking on you, it was in a posture that necessitated my looking up, and morally so it has been since. I conceived that Willoughby had won the greatest prize on earth. And next I was led to the conclusion that he had won it to lose it. Whether he much cares, is the mystery I haven’t leisure to fathom. Himself is the principal consideration with himself, and ever was.’

‘ You discovered it ! ’ said Clara.

‘He uncovered it,’ said De Craye. ‘The miracle was, that the world wouldn’t see. But the world is a piggy-wiggy world for the wealthy fellow who fills a trough for it, and that he has always very sagaciously done. Only women besides myself have detected him. I have never exposed him ; I have been an observer pure and simple : and because I apprehended another catastrophe—making something like the fourth, to my knowledge, one being public . . .’

‘You knew Miss Durham ?’

‘And Harry Oxford too. And they’re a pair as happy as blackbirds in a cherry-tree, in a summer sunrise, with the owner of the garden asleep. Because of that apprehension of mine, I refused the office of best man till Willoughby had sent me a third letter. He insisted on my coming. I came, saw, and was conquered. I trust with all my soul I did not betray myself. I owed that duty to my position of concealing it. As for entirely hiding that I had used my eyes, I can’t say : they must answer for it.’

The colonel was using his eyes with an increasing suavity that threatened more than sweetness.

‘I believe you have been sincerely kind,’ said Clara. ‘We will descend to the path round the lake.’

She did not refuse her hand on the descent, and he let it escape the moment the service was done. As he was performing the admirable character of the man of honour, he had to attend to the observance of details ; and sure of her though he was beginning to feel, there was a touch of the unknown in Clara Middleton which made him fear to stamp assurance ; despite a barely resistible impulse, coming of his emotions and approved by his maxims. He looked at the hand, now a free lady’s hand. Willoughby settled, his chance was great. Who else was in the way ? No one. He counselled himself to wait for

her : she might have ideas of delicacy. Her face was troubled, speculative ; the brows clouded, the lips compressed.

‘ You have not heard this from Miss Dale ? ’ she said.

‘ Last night they were together : this morning she fled. I saw her this morning distressed. She is unwilling to send you a message : she talks vaguely of meeting you some days hence. And it is not the first time he has gone to her for his consolation.’

‘ That is not a proposal,’ Clara reflected. ‘ He is too prudent. He did not propose to her at the time you mention. Have you not been hasty, Colonel De Craye ? ’

Shadows crossed her forehead. She glanced in the direction of the house, and stopped her walk.

‘ Last night, Miss Middleton, there was a listener.’

‘ Who ? ’

‘ Crossjay was under that pretty silk coverlet worked by the Miss Patternes. He came home late, found his door locked, and dashed downstairs into the drawing-room, where he snuggled up and dropped asleep. The two speakers woke him ; they frightened the poor dear lad in his love for you, and after they had gone, he wanted to run out of the house, and I met him, just after I had come back from my search, bursting, and took him to my room, and laid him on the sofa, and abused him for not lying quiet. He was restless as a fish on a bank. When I woke in the morning he was off. Dr. Corney came across him somewhere on the road and drove him to the cottage. I was ringing the bell. Corney told me the boy had you on his brain, and was miserable, so Crossjay and I had a talk.’

‘ Crossjay did not repeat to you the conversation he had heard ? ’ said Clara.

‘ No.’

She smiled rejoicingly, proud of the boy, as she walked on.

‘ But you ’ll pardon me, Miss Middleton—and I ’m for him as much as you are—if I was guilty of a little angling.’

‘ My sympathies are with the fish.’

‘ The poor fellow had a secret that hurt him. It rose to the surface crying to be hooked, and I spared him twice or thrice, because he had a sort of holy sentiment I respected, that none but Mr. Whitford ought to be his father confessor.’

‘ Crossjay ! ’ she cried, hugging her love of the boy.

‘ The secret was one not to be communicated to Miss Dale of all people.’

‘ He said that ? ’

‘ As good as the very words. She informed me too, that she couldn’t induce him to face her straight.’

‘ Oh ! that looks like it. And Crossjay was unhappy ? Very unhappy ? ’

‘ He was just where tears are on the brim, and would have been over, if he were not such a manly youngster.’

‘ It looks . . . ’ She reverted in thought to Willoughby, and doubted, and blindly stretched hands to her recollection of the strange old monster she had discovered in him. Such a man could do anything.

That conclusion fortified her to pursue her walk to the house and give battle for freedom. Willoughby appeared to her scarce human, unreadable, save by the key that she could supply. She determined to put faith in Colonel De Craye’s marvellous divination of circumstances in the dark. Marvels are solid weapons when we are attacked by real prodigies of nature. Her countenance cleared. She conversed with De Craye of the polite and the political world, throwing off her personal burden completely, and charming him.

At the edge of the garden, on the bridge that crossed the

haha from the park, he had a second impulse, almost a warning within, to seize his heavenly opportunity to ask for thanks and move her tender lowered eyelids to hint at his reward. He repressed it, doubtful of the wisdom.

Something like 'heaven forgives me!' was in Clara's mind, though she would have declared herself innocent before the scrutator.

CHAPTER XLIII

IN WHICH SIR WILLOUGHBY IS LED TO THINK THAT THE
ELEMENTS HAVE CONSPIRED AGAINST HIM

CLARA had not taken many steps in the garden before she learnt how great was her debt of gratitude to Colonel De Craye. Willoughby and her father were awaiting her. De Craye, with his ready comprehension of circumstances, turned aside unseen among the shrubs. She advanced slowly.

'The vapours, we may trust, have dispersed?' her father hailed her.

'One word, and these discussions are over, we dislike them equally,' said Willoughby.

'No scenes,' Dr. Middleton added. 'Speak your decision, my girl, *pro formâ*, seeing that he who has the right demands it, and pray release me.'

Clara looked at Willoughby.

'I have decided to go to Miss Dale for her advice.'

There was no appearance in him of a man that has been shot.

'To Miss Dale?—for advice?'

Dr. Middleton invoked the Furies. 'What is the signification of this new freak?'

'Miss Dale must be consulted, papa.'

‘ Consulted with reference to the disposal of your hand in marriage ? ’

‘ She must be.’

‘ Miss Dale, do you say ? ’

‘ I do, papa.’

Dr. Middleton regained his natural elevation from the bend of body habitual with men of an established sanity, pædagogues and others, who are called on at odd intervals to inspect the magnitude of the infinitesimally absurd in human nature : small, that is, under the light of reason, immense in the realms of madness.

His daughter profoundly confused him. He swelled out his chest, remarking to Willoughby : ‘ I do not wonder at your scared expression of countenance, my friend. To discover yourself engaged to a girl as mad as Cassandra, without a boast of the distinction of her being sun-struck, can be no specially comfortable enlightenment. I am opposed to delays, and I will not have a breach of faith committed by daughter of mine.’

‘ Do not repeat those words,’ Clara said to Willoughby.

He started. She had evidently come armed. But how, within so short a space ? What could have instructed her ? And in his bewilderment he gazed hurriedly above, gulped air, and cried : ‘ Scared, sir ? I am not aware that my countenance can show a scare. I am not accustomed to sue for long : I am unable to sustain the part of humble suppliant. She puts me out of harmony with creation—We are plighted, Clara. It is pure waste of time to speak of soliciting advice on the subject.’

‘ Would it be a breach of faith for me to break my engagement ? ’ she said.

‘ You ask ? ’

‘ It is a breach of sanity to propound the interrogation,’ said her father.

She looked at Willoughby ! ‘ Now ? ’

He shrugged haughtily.

‘ Since last night ? ’ said she.

‘ Last night ? ’

‘ Am I not released ? ’

‘ Not by me.’

‘ By your act.’

‘ My dear Clara ! ’

‘ Have you not virtually disengaged me ? ’

‘ I who claim you as mine ? ’

‘ Can you ? ’

‘ I do and must.’

‘ After last night ? ’

‘ Tricks ! shufflings ! Jabber of a barbarian woman upon the evolutions of a serpent ! ’ exclaimed Dr. Middleton. ‘ You were to capitulate, or to furnish reasons for your refusal. You have none. Give him your hand, girl, according to the compact. I praised you to him for returning within the allotted term, and now forbear to disgrace yourself and me.’

‘ Is he perfectly free to offer his ? Ask him, papa.’

‘ Perform your duty. Do let us have peace ! ’

‘ Perfectly free ! as on the day when I offered it first,’ Willoughby frankly waved his honourable hand.

His face was blanched : enemies in the air seemed to have whispered things to her : he doubted the fidelity of the Powers above.

‘ Since last night ? ’ said she.

‘ Oh ! if you insist, I reply, since last night.’

‘ You know what I mean, Sir Willoughby.’

‘ Oh ! certainly.’

‘ You speak the truth ? ’

‘ “ *Sir Willoughby* ” ! ’ her father ejaculated in wrath. ‘ But will you explain what you mean, epitome that you are of all the contradictions and mutabilities ascribed to

women from the beginning ! “ Certainly,” he says, and knows no more than I. She begs grace for an hour, and returns with a fresh store of evasions, to insult the man she has injured. It is my humiliation to confess that our share in this contract is rescued from public ignominy by his generosity. Nor can I congratulate him on his fortune, should he condescend to bear with you to the utmost ; for instead of the young woman I supposed myself to be bestowing on him, I see a fantastical planguncula enlivened by the wanton tempers of a nursery chit. If one may conceive a meaning in her, in miserable apology for such behaviour, some spirit of jealousy informs the girl.’

‘ I can only remark, that there is no foundation for it,’ said Willoughby. ‘ I am willing to satisfy you, Clara. Name the person who discomposes you. I can scarcely imagine one to exist : but who can tell ? ’

She could name no person. The detestable imputation of jealousy would be confirmed if she mentioned a name : and indeed Lætitia was not to be named.

He pursued his advantage : ‘ Jealousy is one of the fits I am a stranger to,—I fancy, sir, that gentlemen have dismissed it. I speak for myself.—But I can make allowances. In some cases, it is considered a compliment ; and often a word will soothe it. The whole affair is so senseless ! However, I will enter the witness-box, or stand at the prisoner’s bar ! Anything to quiet a distempered mind.’

‘ Of you, sir,’ said Dr. Middleton, ‘ might a parent be justly proud.’

‘ It is not jealousy ; I could not be jealous ! ’ Clara cried, stung by the very passion ; and she ran through her brain for a suggestion to win a sign of meltingness if not esteem from her father. She was not an iron maiden, but one among the nervous natures which live largely in the moment, though she was then sacrificing it to her

nature's deep dislike. 'You may be proud of me again, papa.'

She could hardly have uttered anything more impolitic.

'Optume : but deliver yourself ad rem,' he rejoined, alarmingly pacified. 'Firmavit fidem. Do you likewise, and double on us no more like puss in the field.'

'I wish to see Miss Dale,' she said.

Up flew the Rev. Doctor's arms in wrathful despair resembling an imprecation.

'She is at the cottage. You could have seen her,' said Willoughby.

Evidently she had not.

'Is it untrue, that last night, between twelve o'clock and one, in the drawing-room, you proposed marriage to Miss Dale ?'

He became convinced that she must have stolen downstairs during his colloquy with Lætitia, and listened at the door.

'On behalf of old Vernon ?' he said, lightly laughing. 'The idea is not novel, as you know. They are suited, if they could see it.—Lætitia Dale and my cousin Vernon Whitford, sir.'

'Fairly schemed, my friend, and I will say for you, you have the patience, Willoughby—of a husband !'

Willoughby bowed to the encomium, and allowed some fatigue to be visible. He half yawned : 'I claim no happier title, sir,' and made light of the weariful discussion.

Clara was shaken : she feared that Crossjay had heard incorrectly, or that Colonel De Craye had guessed erroneously. It was too likely that Willoughby should have proposed Vernon to Lætitia.

There was nothing to reassure her save the vision of the panic amazement of his face at her persistency in speaking of Miss Dale. She could have declared on oath that she

was right, while admitting all the suppositions to be against her. And unhappily all the Delicacies (a doughty battalion for the defence of ladies until they enter into difficulties and are shorn of them at a blow, bare as dairy-maids), all the body-guard of a young gentlewoman, the drawing-room sylphides, which bear her train, which wreath her hair, which modulate her voice and tone her complexion, which are arrows and shield to awe the creature man, forbade her utterance of what she felt, on pain of instant fulfilment of their oft-repeated threat of late to leave her to the last remnant of a protecting sprite. She could not, as in a dear melodrama, from the aim of a pointed finger denounce him, on the testimony of her instincts, false of speech, false in deed. She could not even declare that she doubted his truthfulness. The refuge of a sullen fit, the refuge of tears, the pretext of a mood, were denied her now by the rigour of those laws of decency which are a garment to ladies of pure breeding.

‘One more respite, papa,’ she implored him, bitterly conscious of the closer tangle her petition involved, and, if it must be betrayed of her, perceiving in an illumination how the knot might become so woefully Gordian that haply in a cloud of wild events the intervention of a gallant gentleman out of heaven, albeit in the likeness of one of earth, would have to cut it: her cry within, as she succumbed to weakness, being fervider: ‘Anything but marry this one!’ She was faint with strife and dejected, a condition in the young when their imaginative energies hold revel uncontrolled and are projectively desperate.

‘No respite!’ said Willoughby genially.

‘And I say, no respite!’ observed her father. ‘You have assumed a position that has not been granted you, Clara Middleton.’

‘I cannot bear to offend you, father.’

‘Him ! Your duty is not to offend him. Address your excuses to him. I refuse to be dragged over the same ground, to reiterate the same command perpetually.’

‘If authority is deputed to me, I claim you,’ said Willoughby.

‘You have not broken faith with me ?’

‘Assuredly not, or would it be possible for me to press my claim ?’

‘And join the right hand to the right,’ said Dr. Middleton : ‘no, it would not be possible. What insane root she has been nibbling, I know not, but she must consign herself to the guidance of those whom the gods have not abandoned, until her intellect is liberated. She was once . . . there : I look not back :—if she it was, and no simulacrum of a reasonable daughter. I welcome the appearance of my friend Mr. Whitford. He is my sea-bath and supper on the beach of Troy, after the day’s battle and dust.’

Vernon walked straight up to them : an act unusual with him, for he was shy of committing an intrusion.

Clara guessed by that, and more by the dancing frown of speculative humour he turned on Willoughby, that he had come charged in support of her. His forehead was curiously lively, as of one who has got a surprise well under, to feed on its amusing contents.

‘Have you seen Crossjay, Mr. Whitford ?’ she said.

‘I’ve pounced on Crossjay ; his bones are sound.’

‘Where did he sleep ?’

‘On a sofa, it seems.’

She smiled, with good hope—Vernon had the story.

Willoughby thought it just to himself that he should defend his measure of severity.

‘The boy lied ; he played a double game.’

‘For which he should have been reasoned with at the Grecian portico of a boy,’ said the Rev. Doctor.

‘My system is different, sir. I could not inflict what I would not endure myself.’

‘So is Greek excluded from the later generations ; and you leave a field, the most fertile in the moralities in youth, unploughed and unsown. Ah ! well. This growing too fine is our way of relapsing upon barbarism. Beware of over-sensitiveness, where nature has plainly indicated her alternative gateway of knowledge. And now, I presume, I am at liberty.’

‘Vernon will excuse us for a minute or two.’

‘I hold by Mr. Whitford now I have him.’

‘I’ll join you in the laboratory, Vernon,’ Willoughby nodded bluntly.

‘We will leave them, Mr. Whitford. They are at the time-honoured dissension upon a particular day, that for the sake of dignity, blushes to be named.’

‘What day ?’ said Vernon, like a rustic.

‘*The day*, these people call it.’

Vernon sent one of his vivid eyeshots from one to the other. His eyes fixed on Willoughby’s with a quivering glow, beyond amazement, as if his humour stood at furnace heat, and absorbed all that came.

Willoughby motioned to him to go.

‘Have you seen Miss Dale, Mr. Whitford ?’ said Clara.

He answered : ‘No. Something has shocked her.’

‘Is it her feeling for Crossjay ?’

‘Ah,’ Vernon said to Willoughby, ‘your pocketing of the key of Crossjay’s bedroom door was a masterstroke !’

The celestial irony suffused her, and she bathed and swam in it, on hearing its dupe reply : ‘My methods of discipline are short. I was not aware that she had been to his door.’

‘But I may hope that Miss Dale will see me,’ said Clara.

‘We are in sympathy about the boy.’

‘Mr. Dale might be seen. He seems to be of a divided

mind with his daughter,' Vernon rejoined. 'She has locked herself up in her room.'

'He is not the only father in that unwholesome predicament,' said Dr. Middleton.

'He talks of coming to you, Willoughby.'

'Why to me?' Willoughby chastened his irritation: 'He will be welcome, of course. It would be better that the boy should come.'

'If there is a chance of your forgiving him,' said Clara.

'Let the Dales know I am prepared to listen to the boy, Vernon. There can be no necessity for Mr. Dale to drag himself here.'

'How are Mr. Dale and his daughter of a divided mind, Mr. Whitford?' said Clara.

Vernon simulated an uneasiness. With a vacant gaze that enlarged around Willoughby and was more discomforting than intentness, he replied: 'Perhaps she is unwilling to give him her entire confidence, Miss Middleton.'

'In which respect, then, our situations present their solitary point of unlikeness in resemblance, for I have it in excess,' observed Dr. Middleton.

Clara dropped her eyelids for the wave to pass over. 'It struck me that Miss Dale was a person of the extremest candour.'

'Why should we be prying into the domestic affairs of the Dales!' Willoughby interjected, and drew out his watch, merely for a diversion; he was on tiptoe to learn whether Vernon was as well instructed as Clara, and hung to the view that he could not be, while drenching in the sensation that he was:—and if so, what were the Powers above but a body of conspirators? He paid Lætitia that compliment. He could not conceive the human betrayal of the secret. Clara's discovery of it had set his common sense adrift.

‘The domestic affairs of the Dales do not concern me,’ said Vernon.

‘And yet, my friend,’ Dr. Middleton balanced himself, and with an air of benevolent slyness, the import of which did not awaken Willoughby until too late, remarked : ‘They might concern you. I will even add, that there is a probability of your being not less than the fount and origin of this division of father and daughter, though Willoughby in the drawing-room last night stands accusably the agent.’

‘Favour me, sir, with an explanation,’ said Vernon, seeking to gather it from Clara.

Dr. Middleton threw the explanation upon Willoughby.

Clara communicated as much as she was able in one of those looks of still depth which say, Think ! and without causing a thought to stir, take us into the pellucid mind.

Vernon was enlightened before Willoughby had spoken. His mouth shut rigidly, and there was a springing increase of the luminous wavering of his eyes. Some star that Clara had watched at night was like them in the vivid wink and overflow of its light. Yet, as he was perfectly sedate, none could have suspected his blood to be chasing wild with laughter, and his frame strung to the utmost to keep it from volleying. So happy was she in his aspect, that her chief anxiety was to recover the name of the star whose shining beckons and speaks, and is in the quick of spirit-fire. It is the sole star which on a night of frost and strong moonlight preserves an indomitable fervency : that she remembered, and the picture of a hoar earth and a lean Orion in flooded heavens, and the star beneath, Eastward of him : but the name ! the name !—She heard Willoughby indistinctly.

‘Oh, the old story ; another effort ; you know my wish ; a failure, of course, and no thanks on either side,

I suppose I must ask your excuse.—They neither of them see what 's good for them, sir.'

'Manifestly, however,' said Dr. Middleton, 'if one may opine from the division we have heard of, the father is disposed to back your nominee.'

'I can't say ; as far as I am concerned, I made a mess of it.'

Vernon withstood the incitement to acquiesce, but he sparkled with his recognition of the fact.

'You meant well, Willoughby.'

'I hope so, Vernon.'

'Only you have driven her away.'

'We must resign ourselves.'

'It won't affect me, for I 'm off to-morrow.'

'You see, sir, the thanks I get.'

'Mr. Whitford,' said Dr. Middleton, 'you have a tower of strength in the lady's father.'

'Would you have me bring it to bear upon the lady, sir ?'

'Wherefore not ?'

'To make her marriage a matter of obedience to her father ?'

'Ay, my friend, a lusty lover would have her gladly on those terms, well knowing it to be for the lady's good. What do you say, Willoughby ?'

'Sir ! Say ? What can I say ? Miss Dale has not plighted her faith. Had she done so, she is a lady who would never dishonour it.'

'She is an ideal of constancy, who would keep to it though it had been broken on the other side,' said Vernon, and Clara thrilled.

'I take that, sir, to be a statue of constancy, modelled upon which, a lady of our flesh may be proclaimed as graduating for the condition of idiocy,' said Dr. Middleton.

'But faith is faith, sir.'

‘ But the broken is the broken, sir, whether in porcelain or in human engagements : and all that the one of the two continuing faithful, I should rather say, regretful, can do, is to devote the remainder of life to the picking up of the fragments ; an occupation properly to be pursued, for the comfort of mankind, within the enclosure of an appointed asylum.’

‘ You destroy the poetry of sentiment, Dr. Middleton.’

‘ To invigorate the poetry of nature, Mr. Whitford.’

‘ Then you maintain, sir, that when faith is broken by one, the engagement ceases, and the other is absolutely free ? ’

‘ I do ; I am the champion of that platitude, and sound that knell to the sentimental world ; and since you have chosen to defend it, I will appeal to Willoughby, and ask him if he would not side with the world of good sense in applauding the nuptials of man or maid married within a month of a jilting ? ’

Clara slipped her arm under her father’s.

‘ Poetry, sir,’ said Willoughby, ‘ I never have been hypocrite enough to pretend to understand or care for.’

Dr. Middleton laughed. Vernon too seemed to admire his cousin for a reply that rang in Clara’s ears as the dullest ever spoken. Her arm grew cold on her father’s. She began to fear Willoughby again.

He depended entirely on his agility to elude the thrusts that assailed him. Had he been able to believe in the treachery of the Powers above, he would at once have seen design in these deadly strokes, for his feelings had rarely been more acute than at the present crisis ; and he would then have led away Clara, to wrangle it out with her, relying on Vernon’s friendliness not to betray him to her father : but a wrangle with Clara promised no immediate fruits, nothing agreeable ; and the lifelong trust he had reposed in his protecting genii, obscured his

intelligence to evidence he would otherwise have accepted on the spot, on the faith of his delicate susceptibility to the mildest impressions which wounded him. Clara might have stooped to listen at the door : she might have heard sufficient to create a suspicion. But Vernon was not in the house last night ; she could not have communicated it to him, and he had not seen Lætitia, who was besides trustworthy, an admirable if a foolish and ill-fated woman.

Preferring to consider Vernon a pragmatistical moralist played upon by a sententious drone, he thought it politic to detach them, and vanquish Clara while she was in the beaten mood, as she had appeared before Vernon's vexatious arrival.

' I 'm afraid, my dear fellow, you are rather too dainty and fussy for a very successful wooer,' he said. ' It 's beautiful on paper, and absurd in life. We have a bit of private business to discuss. We will go inside, sir, I think. I will soon release you.'

Clara pressed her father's arm.

' More ? ' said he.

' Five minutes. There 's a slight delusion to clear, sir. My dear Clara, you will see with different eyes.'

' Papa wishes to work with Mr. Whitford.'

Her heart sank to hear her father say : ' No, 'tis a lost morning. I must consent to pay tax of it for giving another young woman to the world. I have a daughter ! You will, I hope, compensate me, Mr. Whitford, in the afternoon. Be not downcast. I have observed you meditative of late. You will have no clear brain so long as that stuff is on the mind. I could venture to propose to do some pleading for you, should it be needed for the prompter expedition of the affair.'

Vernon briefly thanked him, and said :

' Willoughby has exerted all his eloquence, and you see

the result : you have lost Miss Dale and I have not won her. He did everything that one man can do for another in so delicate a case : even to the repeating of her famous birthday verses to him, to flatter the poetess. His best efforts were foiled by the lady's indisposition for me.'

'Behold,' said Dr. Middleton, as Willoughby, electrified by the mention of the verses, took a sharp stride or two, 'you have in him an advocate who will not be rebuffed by one refusal, and I can affirm that he is tenacious, pertinacious as are few. Justly so. Not to believe in a lady's No, is the approved method of carrying that fortress built to yield. Although unquestionably to have a young man pleading in our interests with a lady, counts its objections. Yet Willoughby being notoriously engaged, may be held to enjoy the privileges of his elders.'

'As an engaged man, sir, he was on a level with his elders in pleading on my behalf with Miss Dale,' said Vernon.

Willoughby strode and muttered. Providence had grown mythical in his thoughts, if not malicious : and it is the peril of this worship, that the object will wear such an alternative aspect when it appears no longer subservient.

'Are we coming, sir ?' he said, and was unheeded. The Rev. Doctor would not be defrauded of rolling his billow.

'As an honourable gentleman faithful to his own engagement and desirous of establishing his relatives, he deserves, in my judgement, the lady's esteem as well as your cordial thanks ; nor should a temporary failure dishearten either of you, notwithstanding the precipitate retreat of the lady from Patterne, and her seclusion in her sanctum on the occasion of your recent visit.'

'Supposing he had succeeded,' said Vernon, driving

Willoughby to frenzy, 'should I have been bound to marry ?'

Matter for cogitation was offered to Dr. Middleton.

'The proposal was without your sanction ?'

'Entirely.'

'You admire the lady ?'

'Respectfully.'

'You do not incline to the state ?'

'An inch of an angle would exaggerate my inclination.'

'How long are we to stand and hear this insufferable nonsense you talk ?' cried Willoughby.

'But if Mr. Whitford was not consulted . . .' Dr. Middleton said, and was overborne by Willoughby's hurried : 'Oblige me, sir.—Oblige me, my good fellow !' he swept his arm to Vernon, and gestured a conducting hand to Clara.

'Here is Mrs. Mountstuart !' she exclaimed.

Willoughby stared. Was it an irruption of a friend or a foe ? He doubted, and stood petrified between the double-question.

Clara had seen Mrs. Mountstuart and Colonel De Craye separating : and now the great lady sailed along the sward like a royal barge in festival trim.

She looked friendly, but friendly to everybody, which was always a frost on Willoughby, and terribly friendly to Clara.

Coming up to her she whispered : 'News indeed ! Wonderful ! I could not credit his hint of it yesterday. Are you satisfied ?'

'Pray, Mrs. Mountstuart, take an opportunity to speak to papa,' Clara whispered in return.

Mrs. Mountstuart bowed to Dr. Middleton, nodded to Vernon, and swam upon Willoughby, with : 'Is it ? But *is* it ? Am I really to believe ? You have ? My dear Sir Willoughby ? Really ?'

The confounded gentleman heaved on a bare plank of wreck in mid sea.

He could oppose only a paralyzed smile to the assault.

His intuitive discretion taught him to fall back a step, while she said : ' So ! ' the plummet word of our mysterious deep fathoms ; and he fell back further, saying : ' Madam ? ' in a tone advising her to speak low.

She recovered her volubility, followed his partial retreat and dropped her voice :

' Impossible to have imagined it as an actual fact ! You were always full of surprises, but this ! this ! Nothing manlier, nothing more gentlemanly has ever been done : nothing : nothing that so completely changes an untenable situation into a comfortable and proper footing for everybody. It is what I like : it is what I love :— sound sense ! Men are so selfish : one cannot persuade them to be reasonable in such positions. But you, Sir Willoughby, have shown wisdom and sentiment : the rarest of all combinations in men.'

' Where have you . . . ? ' Willoughby contrived to say.

' Heard ? The hedges, the housetops, everywhere. All the neighbourhood will have it before nightfall. Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer will soon be rushing here, and declaring they never expected anything else, I do not doubt. I am not so pretentious. I beg your excuse for that " twice " of mine yesterday. Even if it hurt my vanity, I should be happy to confess my error : I was utterly out. But then I did not reckon on a fatal attachment, I thought men were incapable of it. I thought we women were the only poor creatures persecuted by a fatality. It *is* a fatality ! You tried hard to escape, indeed you did. And she will do honour to your final surrender, my dear friend. She is gentle, and very clever, very : she is devoted to you : she will entertain excellently. I see her like a flower in sunshine. She will

expand to a perfect hostess. Patterne will shine under her reign ; you have my warrant for that. And so will you. Yes, you flourish best when adored. It must be adoration. You have been under a cloud of late. Years ago I said it was a match, when no one supposed you could stoop. Lady Busshe would have it was a screen, and she was deemed high wisdom. The world will be with you. All the women will be : excepting, of course, Lady Busshe, whose pride is in prophesy ; and she will soon be too glad to swell the host. There, my friend, your sincerest and oldest admirer congratulates you. I could not contain myself ; I was compelled to pour forth. And now I must go and be talked to by Dr. Middleton. How does he take it ? They leave ? ’

‘ He is perfectly well,’ said Willoughby, aloud, quite distraught.

She acknowledged his just correction of her for running on to an extreme in low-toned converse, though they stood sufficiently isolated from the others. These had by this time been joined by Colonel De Craye, and were all chatting in a group—of himself, Willoughby horribly suspected.

Clara was gone from him ! Gone ! but he remembered his oath and vowed it again : not to Horace De Craye ! She was gone, lost, sunk into the world of waters of rival men, and he determined that his whole force should be used to keep her from that man : the false friend who had supplanted him in her shallow heart, and might, if he succeeded, boast of having done it by simply appearing on the scene.

Willoughby intercepted Mrs. Mountstuart as she was passing over to Dr. Middleton : ‘ My dear lady ! spare me a minute.’

De Craye sauntered up, with a face of the friendliest

humour: 'Never was man like you, Willoughby, for shaking new patterns in a kaleidoscope.'

'Have you turned punster, Horace?' Willoughby replied, smarting to find yet another in the demon secret, and he drew Dr. Middleton two or three steps aside, and hurriedly begged him to abstain from prosecuting the subject with Clara. 'We must try to make her happy as we best can, sir. She may have her reasons—a young lady's reasons!' He laughed, and left the Rev. Doctor considering within himself under the arch of his lofty frown of stupefaction.

De Craye smiled slyly and winningly as he shadowed a deep droop on the bend of his head before Clara, signifying his absolute devotion to her service, and this present good fruit for witness of his merits.

She smiled sweetly though vaguely. 'There was no concealment of their intimacy.'

'The battle is over,' Vernon said quietly, when Willoughby had walked some paces beside Mrs. Mountstuart, adding: 'You may expect to see Mr. Dale here. He knows.'

Vernon and Clara exchanged one look, hard on his part, in contrast with her softness, and he proceeded to the house.

De Craye waited for a word or a promising look. He was patient, being self-assured, and passed on.

Clara linked her arm with her father's once more, and said, on a sudden brightness: 'Sirius, papa!'

He repeated it in the profoundest manner: 'Sirius! And is there,' he asked, 'a feminine scintilla of sense in that?'

'It is the name of the star I was thinking of, dear papa.'

'It was the star observed by King Agamemnon before the sacrifice in Aulis. You were thinking of that? But,

my love, my Iphigeneia, you have not a father who will insist on sacrificing you.'

'Did I hear him tell you to humour me, papa ?'

Dr. Middleton humphed.

'Verily the dog-star rages in many heads,' he responded.

CHAPTER XLIV

DR. MIDDLETON : THE LADIES ELEANOR AND ISABEL :
AND MR. DALE

CLARA looked up at the flying clouds. She travelled with them now, and tasted freedom, but she prudently forebore to vex her father ; she held herself in reserve.

They were summoned by the mid-day bell.

Few were speakers at the meal, few were eaters. Clara was impelled to join it by her desire to study Mrs. Mountstuart's face. Willoughby was obliged to preside. It was a meal of an assembly of mutes and plates, that struck the ear like the well-known sound of a collection of offerings in church after an impressive exhortation from the pulpit. A sally of Colonel De Craye's met the reception given to a charity-boy's muffled burst of animal spirits in the silence of the sacred edifice. Willoughby tried politics with Dr. Middleton, whose regular appetite preserved him from uncongenial speculations when the hour for appeasing it had come ; and he alone did honour to the dishes, replying to his host :

'Times are bad, you say, and we have a Ministry doing with us what they will. Well, sir, and that being so, and opposition a manner of kicking them into greater stability, it is the time for wise men to retire within themselves, with the steady determination of the seed in the earth

to grow. Repose upon nature, sleep in firm faith, and abide the seasons. That is my counsel to the weaker party.'

The counsel was excellent, but it killed the topic.

Dr. Middleton's appetite was watched for the signal to rise and breathe freely ; and such is the grace accorded to a good man of an untroubled conscience engaged in doing his duty to himself, that he perceived nothing of the general restlessness ; he went through the dishes calmly, and as calmly he quoted Milton to the ladies Eleanor and Isabel, when the company sprang up all at once upon his closing his repast. Vernon was taken away from him by Willoughby. Mrs. Mountstuart beckoned covertly to Clara. Willoughby should have had something to say to him, Dr. Middleton thought : the position was not clear. But the situation was not disagreeable ; and he was in no serious hurry, though he wished to be enlightened.

'This,' Dr. Middleton said to the spinster aunts, as he accompanied them to the drawing-room, 'shall be no lost day for me if I may devote the remainder of it to you.'

'The thunder, we fear, is not remote,' murmured one.

'We fear it is imminent,' sighed the other.

They took to chanting in alternation.

'—We are accustomed to peruse our Willoughby, and we know him by a shadow.'

'—From his infancy to his glorious youth and his established manhood.'

'—He was ever the soul of chivalry.'

'—Duty : duty first. The happiness of his family : the well-being of his dependents.'

'—If proud of his name, it was not an over-weening pride ; it was founded in the conscious possession of exalted qualities.'

'—He could be humble when occasion called for it.'

Dr. Middleton bowed to the litany, feeling that occasion called for humbleness from him.

‘Let us hope . . . !’ he said, with unassumed penitence on behalf of his inscrutable daughter.

The ladies resumed :—

‘—Vernon Whitford, not of his blood, is his brother !’

‘—A thousand instances ! Lætitia Dale remembers them better than we.’

‘—That any blow should strike him !’

‘—That another should be in store for him !’

‘—It seems impossible he can be quite misunderstood !’

‘Let us hope . . . !’ said Dr. Middleton.

‘—One would not deem it too much for the dispenser of goodness to expect to be a little looked up to !’

‘—When he was a child he one day mounted a chair, and there he stood in danger, would not let us touch him, because he was taller than we, and we were to gaze. Do you remember him, Eleanor ? “I am the sun of the house !” It was inimitable !’

‘—Your feelings ; he would have your feelings ! He was fourteen when his cousin Grace Whitford married, and we lost him. They had been the greatest friends ; and it was long before he appeared among us. He has never cared to see her since.’

‘—But he has befriended her husband. Never has he failed in generosity. His only fault is—’

‘—His sensitiveness. And that is—’

‘—His secret. And that—’

‘—You are not to discover ! It is the same with him in manhood. No one will accuse Willoughby Patterne of a deficiency of manliness : but what is it ?—he suffers, as none suffer, if he is not loved. He himself is inalterably constant in affection.’

‘—What it is no one can say. We have lived with him

all his life, and we know him ready to make any sacrifice : only, he does demand the whole heart in return. And if he doubts, he looks as we have seen him to-day.'

'—Shattered : as we have never seen him look before.'

'We will hope,' said Dr. Middleton, this time hastily. He tingled to say 'what it was' : he had it in him to solve perplexity in their inquiry. He did say, adopting familiar speech to suit the theme : 'You know, ladies, we English come of a rough stock. A dose of rough dealing in our youth does us no harm, braces us. Otherwise we are likely to feel chilly : we grow too fine where tenuity of stature is necessarily buffeted by gales, namely, in our self-esteem. We are barbarians, on a forcing soil of wealth, in a conservatory of comfortable security ; but still barbarians. So, you see, we shine at our best when we are plucked out of that, to where hard blows are given, in a state of war. In a state of war we are at home, our men are high-minded fellows, Scipios and good legionaries. In the state of peace we do not live in peace : our native roughness breaks out in unexpected places, under extraordinary aspects—tyrannies, extravagances, domestic exactions : and if we have not had sharp early training . . . within and without . . . the old-fashioned island-instrument to drill into us the civilization of our masters, the ancients, we show it by running here and there to some excess. Ahem. Yet,' added the Rev. Doctor, abandoning his effort to deliver a weighty truth obscurely for the comprehension of dainty spinster ladies, the superabundance of whom in England was in his opinion largely the cause of our decay as a people, 'yet I have not observed this ultra-sensitiveness in Willoughby. He has borne to hear more than I, certainly no example of the frailty, could have endured.'

'He concealed it,' said the ladies. 'It is intense.'

'Then is it a disease ?'

‘It bears no explanation ; it is mystic.’

‘It is a cultus, then, a form of self-worship.’

‘Self !’ they ejaculated. ‘But is not Self indifferent to others ? Is it Self that craves for sympathy, love and devotion ?’

‘He is an admirable host, ladies.’

‘He is admirable in all respects.’

‘Admirable must he be who can impress discerning women, his life-long housemates, so favourably. He is, I repeat, a perfect host.’

‘He will be a perfect husband.’

‘In all probability.’

‘It is a certainty. Let him be loved and obeyed, he will be guided. That is the secret for her whom he so fatally loves. That, if we had dared, we would have hinted to her. She will rule him through her love of him, and through him all about her. And it will not be a rule he submits to, but a love he accepts. If she could see it !’

‘If she were a metaphysician !’ sighed Dr. Middleton.

‘—But a sensitiveness so keen as his might—’

‘—Fretted by an unsympathizing mate—’

‘—In the end become, for the best of us is mortal—’

‘—Callous !’

‘—He would feel perhaps as much—’

‘—Or more !—’

‘—He would still be tender—’

‘—But he might grow outwardly hard !’

Both ladies looked up at Dr. Middleton, as they revealed the dreadful prospect.

‘It is the story told of corns !’ he said, sad as they.

The three stood drooping : the ladies with an attempt to digest his remark ; the Rev. Doctor in dejection lest his gallantry should no longer continue to wrestle with his good sense.

He was rescued.

The door opened and a footman announced :

‘ Mr. Dale.’

Miss Eleanor and Miss Isabel made a sign to one another of raising their hands.

They advanced to him, and welcomed him.

‘ Pray be seated, Mr. Dale. You have not brought us bad news of our Lætitia ? ’

‘ So rare is the pleasure of welcoming you here, Mr. Dale, that we are in some alarm, when, as we trust, it should be matter for unmixed congratulation.’

‘ Has Dr. Corney been doing wonders ? ’

‘ I am indebted to him for the drive to your house, ladies,’ said Mr. Dale, a spare, close-buttoned gentleman, with an Indian complexion deadened in the sick-chamber. ‘ It is unusual for me to stir from my precincts.’

‘ The Rev. Dr. Middleton.’

Mr. Dale bowed. He seemed surprised.

‘ You live in a splendid air, sir,’ observed the Rev. Doctor.

‘ I can profit little by it, sir,’ replied Mr. Dale. He asked the ladies : ‘ Will Sir Willoughby be disengaged ? ’

They consulted : ‘ He is with Vernon. We will send to him.’

The bell was rung.

‘ I have had the gratification of making the acquaintance of your daughter, Mr. Dale, a most estimable lady,’ said Dr. Middleton.

Mr. Dale bowed. ‘ She is honoured by your praises, sir. To the best of my belief—I speak as a father—she merits them. Hitherto I have had no doubts.’

‘ Of Lætitia ? ’ exclaimed the ladies ; and spoke of her as gentleness and goodness incarnate.

‘ Hitherto I have devoutly thought so,’ said Mr. Dale.

‘ Surely she is the very sweetest nurse, the most devoted of daughters ! ’

‘ As far as concerns her duty to her father, I can say she is that, ladies.’

‘ In all her relations, Mr. Dale ! ’

‘ It is my prayer,’ he said.

The footman appeared. He announced that Sir Willoughby was in the laboratory with Mr. Whitford, and the door locked.

‘ Domestic business,’ the ladies remarked. ‘ You know Willoughby’s diligent attention to affairs, Mr. Dale.’

‘ He is well ? ’ Mr. Dale inquired.

‘ In excellent health.’

‘ Body and mind ? ’

‘ But, dear Mr. Dale, he is never ill.’

‘ Ah ! For one to hear that who is never well ! And Mr. Whitford is quite sound ? ’

‘ Sound ? The question alarms me for myself,’ said Dr. Middleton. ‘ Sound as our Constitution, the Credit of the country, the reputation of our Prince of poets. I pray you to have no fears for him.’

Mr. Dale gave the mild little sniff of a man thrown deeper into perplexity.

He said : ‘ Mr. Whitford works his head ; he is a hard student ; he may not be always, if I may so put it, at home on worldly affairs.’

‘ Dismiss that defamatory legend of the student, Mr. Dale ; and take my word for it, that he who persistently works his head has the strongest for all affairs.’

‘ Ah ! Your daughter, sir, is here ? ’

‘ My daughter is here, sir, and will be most happy to present her respects to the father of her friend Miss Dale.’

‘ They are friends ? ’

‘ Very cordial friends.’

Mr. Dale administered another feebly pacifying sniff to himself.

‘Lætitia!’ he sighed in apostrophe, and swept his forehead with a hand seen to shake.

The ladies asked him anxiously whether he felt the heat of the room; and one offered him a smelling-bottle.

He thanked them. ‘I can hold out until Sir Willoughby comes.’

‘We fear to disturb him when his door is locked, Mr. Dale; but, if you wish it, we will venture on a message. You have really no bad news of our Lætitia? She left us hurriedly this morning, without any leave-taking, except a word to one of the maids, that your condition required her immediate presence.’

‘My condition! And now her door is locked to me! We have spoken through the door, and that is all. I stand sick and stupefied between two locked doors, neither of which will open, it appears, to give me the enlightenment I need more than medicine.’

‘Dear me!’ cried Dr. Middleton, ‘I am struck by your description of your position, Mr. Dale. It would aptly apply to our humanity of the present generation; and were these the days when I sermonized, I could propose that it should afford me an illustration for the pulpit. For my part, when doors are closed I try not their locks; and I attribute my perfect equanimity, health even, to an uninquiring acceptance of the fact that they are closed to me. I read my page by the light I have. On the contrary, the world of this day, if I may presume to quote you for my purpose, is heard knocking at those two locked doors of the secret of things on each side of us, and is beheld standing sick and stupefied because it has got no response to its knocking. Why, sir, let the world compare the diverse fortunes of the beggar and the postman: knock to give, and it is opened unto you: knock to crave, and it continues shut. I say, carry a letter to your

locked door, and you shall have a good reception : but there is none that is handed out. For which reason . . .’

Mr. Dale swept a perspiring forehead, and extended his hand in supplication ; ‘ I am an invalid, Dr. Middleton,’ he said. ‘ I am unable to cope with analogies. I have but strength for the slow digestion of facts.’

‘ For facts, we are bradypeptics to a man, sir. We know not yet if nature be a fact or an effort to master one. The world has not yet assimilated the first fact it stepped on. We are still in the endeavour to make good blood of the fact of our being.’

Pressing his hands at his temples, Mr. Dale moaned : ‘ My head twirls ; I did unwisely to come out. I came on an impulse ; I trust, honourable. I am unfit—I cannot follow you, Dr. Middleton. Pardon me.’

‘ Nay, sir, let me say, from my experience of my countrymen, that, if you do not follow me, and can abstain from abusing me in consequence, you are magnanimous,’ the Rev. Doctor replied, hardly consenting to let go the man he had found to indemnify him for his gallant service of acquiescing as a mute to the ladies, though he knew his breathing robustfulness to be as an East wind to weak nerves, and himself an engine of punishment when he had been torn for a day from his books.

Miss Eleanor said : ‘ The enlightenment you need, Mr. Dale ? Can we enlighten you ? ’

‘ I think not,’ he answered faintly. ‘ I think I will wait for Sir Willoughby . . . or Mr. Whitford. If I can keep my strength. Or could I exchange—I fear to break down—two words with the young lady who is, was . . . ? ’

‘ Miss Middleton, my daughter, sir ? She shall be at your disposition ; I will bring her to you.’ Dr. Middleton stopped at the window. ‘ She, it is true, may better know the mind of Miss Dale than I. But I flatter myself I know the gentleman better. I think, Mr. Dale, addressing

you as the lady's father, you will find me a persuasive, I could be an impassioned, advocate in his interests.'

Mr. Dale was confounded ; the weakly sapling caught in a gust falls back as he did.

' Advocate ? ' he said. He had little breath.

' His impassioned advocate, I repeat : for I have the highest opinion of him. You see, sir, I am acquainted with the circumstances. I believe,' Dr. Middleton half turned to the ladies, ' we must, until your potent inducements, Mr. Dale, have been joined to my instances, and we overcome what feminine scruples there may be, treat the circumstances as not generally public. Our Strephon may be chargeable with shyness. But if for the present it is incumbent on us, in proper consideration for the parties, not to be nominally precise, it is hardly requisite in this household that we should be. He is now for protesting indifference to the state. I fancy we understand that phase of amatory frigidity. Frankly, Mr. Dale, I was once in my life myself refused by a lady, and I was not indignant, merely indifferent to the marriage-tie.'

' My daughter *has* refused him, sir ? '

' Temporarily it would appear that she has declined the proposal.'

' He was at liberty ? . . . he could honourably . . . ? '

' His best friend and nearest relative is your guarantee.'

' I know it ; I hear so : I am informed of that ; I have heard of the proposal, and that he could honourably make it. Still, I am helpless, I cannot move, until I am assured that my daughter's reasons are such as a father need not underline.'

' Does the lady, perchance, equivocate ? '

' I have not seen her this morning ; I rise late. I hear an astounding account of the cause for her departure from Patterne, and I find her door locked to me—no answer.'

‘ It is that she has no reasons to give, and she feared the demand for them.’

‘ Ladies ! ’ dolorously exclaimed Mr. Dale.

‘ We guess the secret, we guess it ! ’ they exclaimed in reply ; and they looked smilingly, as Dr. Middleton looked.

‘ She had no reasons to give ? ’ Mr. Dale spelt these words to his understanding. ‘ Then, sir, she knew you not adverse ? ’

‘ Undoubtedly, by my high esteem for the gentleman, she must have known me not adverse. But she would not consider me a principal. She could hardly have conceived me an obstacle. I am simply the gentleman’s friend. A zealous friend, let me add.’

Mr. Dale put out an imploring hand ; it was too much for him.

‘ Pardon me ; I have a poor head. And your daughter the same, sir ? ’

‘ We will not measure it too closely, but I may say, my daughter the same, sir. And likewise—may I not add ?—these ladies.’

Mr. Dale made sign that he was overfilled. ‘ Where am I ! And Lætitia refused him ? ’

‘ Temporarily, let us assume. Will it not partly depend on you, Mr. Dale ! ’

‘ But what strange things have been happening during my daughter’s absence from the cottage ! ’ cried Mr. Dale, betraying an elixir in his veins. ‘ I feel that I could laugh if I did not dread to be thought insane. She refused his hand, and he was at liberty to offer it ? My girl ! We are all on our heads. The fairy-tales were right and the lesson-books were wrong. But it is really, it is really very demoralizing. An invalid—and I am one, and no momentary exhilaration will be taken for the contrary—clings to the idea of stability, order. The slightest

disturbance of the wonted course of things unsettles him. Why, for years I have been prophesying it ! and for years I have had everything against me, and now when it is confirmed, I am wondering that I must not call myself a fool ! ’

‘ And for years, dear Mr. Dale, this union, in spite of counter-currents and human arrangements, has been our Willoughby’s constant preoccupation,’ said Miss Eleanor.

‘ His most cherished aim,’ said Miss Isabel.

‘ The name was not spoken by me,’ said Dr. Middleton. ‘ But it is out, and perhaps better out, if we would avoid the chance of mystifications. I do not suppose we are seriously committing a breach of confidence, though he might have wished to mention it to you first himself. I have it from Willoughby that last night he appealed to your daughter, Mr. Dale—not for the first time, if I apprehend him correctly ; and unsuccessfully. He despairs. I do not : supposing, that is, your assistance vouchsafed to us. And I do not despair, because the gentleman is a gentleman of worth, of acknowledged worth. You know him well enough to grant me that. I will bring you my daughter to help me in sounding his praises.’

Dr. Middleton stepped through the window to the lawn on an elastic foot, beaming with the happiness he felt charged to confer on his friend Mr. Whitford.

‘ Ladies ! it passes all wonders,’ Mr. Dale gasped.

‘ Willoughby’s generosity does pass all wonders,’ they said in chorus.

The door opened : Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer were announced.

CHAPTER XLV

THE PATTERNES LADIES : MR. DALE : LADY BUSSHE AND
LADY CULMER : WITH MRS. MOUNTSTUART JENKINSON

LADY BUSSHE and Lady Culmer entered spying to right and left. At the sight of Mr. Dale in the room, Lady Busshe murmured to her friend : ‘ Confirmation ! ’

Lady Culmer murmured : ‘ Corney is quite reliable.’

‘ The man is his own best tonic.’

‘ He is invaluable for the country.’

Miss Eleanor and Miss Isabel greeted them.

The amiability of the Patterne ladies, combined with their total eclipse behind their illustrious nephew, invited enterprising women of the world to take liberties, and they were not backward.

Lady Busshe said : ‘ Well ? the news ! we have the outlines. Don’t be astonished : we know the points : we have heard the gun. I could have told you as much yesterday. I *saw* it. And I guessed it the day before. Oh ! I do believe in fatalities now. Lady Culmer and I agree to take that view : it is the simplest. Well, and are you satisfied, my dears ? ’

The ladies grimaced interrogatively. ‘ With what ? ’

‘ With it ! with all ! with her ! with him ! ’

‘ Our Willoughby ? ’

‘ Can it be possible that they require a dose of Corney ? ’

Lady Busshe remarked to Lady Culmer.

‘ They play discretion to perfection,’ said Lady Culmer. ‘ But, my dears, we are in the secret.’

‘ How did she behave ? ’ whispered Lady Busshe. ‘ No high flights and flutters, I do hope. She was well-connected, they say ; though I don’t comprehend what

they mean by a line of scholars—one thinks of a row of pinafores : and she was pretty. That is well enough at the start. It never will stand against brains. He had the two in the house to contrast them, and . . . the result ! A young woman with brains—in a house—beats all your Beauties. Lady Culmer and I have determined on that view. He thought her a delightful partner for a dance, and found her rather tiresome at the end of the gallopade. I saw it yesterday, clear as daylight. She did not understand him, and he did understand her. That will be our report.'

'She is young : she will learn,' said the ladies, uneasily, but in total ignorance of her meaning.

'And you are charitable, and always were. I remember you had a good word for that girl Durham.'

Lady Busshe crossed the room to Mr. Dale, who was turning over leaves of a grand book of the heraldic devices of our great Families.

'Study it,' she said, 'study it, my dear Mr. Dale ; you are in it, by right of possessing a clever and accomplished daughter. At page 300 you will find the Patterne crest. And mark me, she will drag you into the Peerage before she has done—relatively, you know. Sir Willoughby and wife will not be contented to sit down and manage the estates. Has not Lætitia immense ambition ? And very creditable, I say ! '

Mr. Dale tried to protest something. He shut the book, examined the binding, flapped the cover with a finger, hoped her ladyship was in good health, alluded to his own and the strangeness of the bird out of the cage.

'You will probably take up your residence here, in a larger and handsomer cage, Mr. Dale.'

He shook his head. 'Do I apprehend . . . ? ' he said.

'I *know*,' said she.

'Dear me, can it be ? '

Mr. Dale gazed upward, with the feelings of one awakened late to see a world alive in broad daylight.

Lady Busshe dropped her voice. She took the liberty permitted to her with an inferior in station, while treating him to a tone of familiarity in acknowledgement of his expected rise : which is high breeding, or the exact measurement of social dues.

‘ Lætitia will be happy, you may be sure. I love to see a long and faithful attachment rewarded—love it ! Her tale is the triumph of patience. Far above Grizzel ! No woman will be ashamed of pointing to Lady Patterne. You are uncertain ? You are in doubt ? Let me hear—as low as you like. But there is no doubt of the new shifting of the scene ?—no doubt of the proposal ? Dear Mr. Dale ! a very little louder. You are here because— ? of course you wish to see Sir Willoughby. She ? I did not catch you quite. She ? . . . it seems, you say . . . ? ’

Lady Culmer said to the Patterne ladies :

‘ You must have had a distressing time. These affairs always mount up to a climax, unless people are very well bred. We saw it coming. Naturally we did not expect such a transformation of brides : who could ? If I had laid myself down on my back to think, I should have had it. I am unerring when I set to speculating on my back. One is cooler : ideas come ; they have not to be forced. That is why I am brighter on a dull winter afternoon, on the sofa, beside my tea-service, than at any other season. However, your trouble is over. When did the Middletons leave ? ’

‘ The Middletons leave ? ’ said the ladies.

‘ Dr. Middleton and his daughter.’

‘ They have not left us.’

‘ The Middletons are here ? ’

‘ They are here, yes. Why should they have left Patterne ? ’

‘Why?’

‘Yes. They are likely to stay some days longer.’

‘Goodness!’

‘There is no ground for any report to the contrary, Lady Culmer.’

‘No ground!’

Lady Culmer called out to Lady Busshe.

A cry came back from that startled dame.

‘She has refused him!’

‘Who?’

‘*She* has!’

‘She?—Sir Willoughby?’

‘Refused!—declines the honour.’

‘Oh! never! No, that carries the incredible beyond romance! But is he perfectly at . . .?’

‘Quite, it seems. And she was asked in due form and refused.’

‘No, and no again!’

‘My dear, I have it from Mr. Dale.’

‘Mr. Dale, what can be the signification of her conduct!’

‘Indeed, Lady Culmer,’ said Mr. Dale, not unpleasantly agitated by the interest he excited, in spite of his astonishment at a public discussion of the matter in this house, ‘I am in the dark. Her father should know, but I do not. Her door is locked to me; I have not seen her. I am absolutely in the dark. I am a recluse. I have forgotten the ways of the world. I should have supposed her father would first have been addressed.’

‘Tut-tut. Modern gentlemen are not so formal; they are creatures of impulse and take a pride in it. He spoke. We settle that. But where did you get this tale of a refusal?’

‘I have it from Dr. Middleton.’

‘From Dr. Middleton!’ shouted Lady Busshe.

‘The Middletons are here,’ said Lady Culmer.

‘What whirl are we in?’ Lady Busshe got up, ran two or three steps and seated herself in another chair. ‘Oh! do let us proceed upon system. If not, we shall presently be rageing; we shall be dangerous. The Middletons are here, and Dr. Middleton himself communicates to Mr. Dale that Lætitia Dale has refused the hand of Sir Willoughby, who is ostensibly engaged to his own daughter! And pray, Mr. Dale, how did Dr. Middleton speak of it? Compose yourself; there is no violent hurry, though our sympathy with you and our interest in all the parties does perhaps agitate us a little. Quite at your leisure—speak!’

‘Madam . . . Lady Busshe.’ Mr. Dale gulped a ball in his throat. ‘I see no reason why I should not speak. I do not see how I can have been deluded. The Miss Patternes heard him. Dr. Middleton began upon it, not I. I was unaware, when I came, that it was a refusal. I had been informed that there was a proposal. My authority for the tale was positive. The object of my visit was to assure myself of the integrity of my daughter’s conduct. She had always the highest sense of honour. But passion is known to mislead, and there was this most strange report. I feared that our humblest apologies were due to Dr. Middleton and his daughter. I know the charm Lætitia can exercise. Madam, in the plainest language, without a possibility of my misapprehending him, Dr. Middleton spoke of himself as the advocate of the suitor for my daughter’s hand. I have a poor head. I supposed at once an amicable rupture between Sir Willoughby and Miss Middleton, or that the version which had reached me of their engagement was not strictly accurate. My head is weak. Dr. Middleton’s language is trying to a head like mine; but I can speak positively on the essential points: he spoke of himself as ready to be the impassioned advocate of the suitor for my daughter’s hand. Those

were his words. I understood him to entreat me to intercede with her. Nay, the name was mentioned. There was no concealment. I am certain there could not be a misapprehension. And my feelings were touched by his anxiety for Sir Willoughby's happiness. I attributed it to a sentiment upon which I need not dwell. Impassioned advocate, he said.'

'We are in a perfect maelstrom!' cried Lady Busshe, turning to everybody.

'It is a complete hurricane!' cried Lady Culmer.

A light broke over the faces of the Patterne ladies. They exchanged it with one another.

They had been so shocked as to be almost offended by Lady Busshe, but their natural gentleness and habitual submission rendered them unequal to the task of checking her.

'Is it not,' said Miss Eleanor, 'a misunderstanding that a change of names will rectify?'

'This is by no means the first occasion,' said Miss Isabel, 'that Willoughby has pleaded for his cousin Vernon.'

'We deplore extremely the painful error into which Mr. Dale has fallen.'

'It springs, we now perceive, from an entire misapprehension of Dr. Middleton's.'

'Vernon was in his mind. It was clear to us.'

'Impossible that it could have been Willoughby!'

'You see the impossibility, the error!'

'And the Middletons here!' said Lady Busshe. 'Oh! if we leave unilluminated we shall be the laughing-stock of the county. Mr. Dale, please, wake up. Do you see? You may have been mistaken.'

'Lady Busshe,' he woke up; 'I may have mistaken Dr. Middleton; he has a language that I can compare only to a review-day of the field forces. But I have the story on

authority that I cannot question : it is confirmed by my daughter's unexampled behaviour. And if I live through this day I shall look about me as a ghost to-morrow.'

'Dear Mr. Dale!' said the Patterne ladies compassionately.

Lady Busshe murmured to them : 'You know the two did not agree ; they did not get on : I saw it ; I predicted it.'

'She will understand him in time,' said they.

'Never. And my belief is, they have parted by consent, and Letty Dale wins the day at last. Yes, now I do believe it.'

The ladies maintained a decided negative, but they knew too much not to feel perplexed, and they betrayed it, though they said : 'Dear Lady Busshe ! is it credible, in decency ?'

'Dear Mrs. Mountstuart !' Lady Busshe invoked her great rival appearing among them : 'You come most opportunely ; we are in a state of inextricable confusion : we are bordering on frenzy. You, and none but you, can help us. You know, you always know ; we hang on you. Is there any truth in it ? a particle ?'

Mrs. Mountstuart seated herself regally. 'Ah ! Mr. Dale !' she said, inclining to him. 'Yes, dear Lady Busshe, there is a particle.'

'Now, do not roast us ! You can ; you have the art. I have the whole story. That is, I have a part. I mean, I have the outlines. I cannot be deceived, but you can fill them in, I know you can. I saw it yesterday. Now, tell us, tell us. It must be quite true or utterly false. Which is it ?'

'Be precise.'

'His fatality ! you called her. Yes, I was sceptical. But here we have it all come round again, and if the tale is true, I shall own you infallible. Has he ?—and she ?'

‘Both.’

‘And the Middletons here? They have not gone; they keep the field. And more astounding, she refuses him! And to add to it, Dr. Middleton intercedes with Mr. Dale for Sir Willoughby!’

‘Dr. Middleton intercedes!’ This was rather astonishing to Mrs. Mountstuart.

‘For Vernon,’ Miss Eleanor emphasized.

‘For Vernon Whitford, his cousin,’ said Miss Isabel, still more emphatically.

‘Who,’ said Mrs. Mountstuart, with a sovereign lift and turn of her head, ‘speaks of a refusal?’

‘I have it from Mr. Dale,’ said Lady Busshe.

‘I had it, I thought, distinctly from Dr. Middleton,’ said Mr. Dale.

‘That Willoughby proposed to Lætitia for his cousin Vernon, Dr. Middleton meant,’ said Miss Eleanor.

Her sister followed: ‘Hence this really ridiculous misconception!—sad indeed,’ she added, for balm to Mr. Dale. ‘Willoughby was Vernon’s proxy. His cousin, if not his first, is ever the second thought with him.’

‘But can we continue . . .?’

‘Such a discussion!’

Mrs. Mountstuart gave them a judicial hearing. They were regarded in the county as the most indulgent of nonentities, and she as little as Lady Busshe was restrained from the burning topic in their presence. She pronounced:

‘Each party is right and each is wrong.’

A cry: ‘I shall shriek!’ came from Lady Busshe.

‘Cruel!’ groaned Lady Culmer.

‘Mixed, you are all wrong. Disentangled, you are each of you right. Sir Willoughby does think of his cousin Vernon; he is anxious to establish him; he is the author of a proposal to that effect.’

‘ We know it ! ’ the Patterne ladies exclaimed. ‘ And Lætitia rejected poor Vernon once more ! ’

‘ Who spoke of Miss Dale’s rejection of Mr. Whitford ? ’

‘ Is he not rejected ? ’ Lady Culmer inquired.

‘ It is in debate, and at this moment being decided. ’

‘ Oh ! do be seated, Mr. Dale,’ Lady Busshe implored him, rising to thrust him back to his chair if necessary. ‘ Any dislocation, and we are thrown out again ! We must hold together if this riddle is ever to be read. Then, dear Mrs. Mountstuart, we are to say that there is no truth in the other story ? ’

‘ You are to say nothing of the sort, dear Lady Busshe. ’

‘ Be merciful ! And what of the fatality ? ’

‘ As positive as the Pole to the needle. ’

‘ She has not refused him ? ’

‘ Ask your own sagacity. ’

‘ Accepted ? ’

‘ Wait. ’

‘ And all the world’s ahead of me ! Now, Mrs. Mountstuart, you are oracle. Riddles, if you like—only speak ! If we can’t have corn, give us husks. ’

‘ Is any one of us able to anticipate events, Lady Busshe ? ’

‘ Yes. I believe that you are. I bow to you. I do sincerely. So it’s another person for Mr. Whitford ? You nod. And it is our Lætitia for Sir Willoughby ? You smile. You would not deceive me ? A very little, and I run about crazed and howl at your doors. And Dr. Middleton is made to play blind man in the midst ? And the other person is—now I see day ! An amicable rupture, and a smooth new arrangement ! She has money ; she was never the match for our hero ; never ; I saw it yesterday, and before, often : and so he hands her over—tuthe-rum-tum-tum, tuthe-rum-tum-tum. ’ Lady Busshe struck a quick march on her knee : ‘ Now

isn't that clever guessing? The shadow of a clue for me! And because I know human nature. One peep, and I see the combination in a minute. So he keeps the money in the family, becomes a benefactor to his cousin by getting rid of the girl, and succumbs to his fatality. Rather a pity he let it ebb and flow so long. Time counts the tides, you know. But it improves the story. I defy any other county in the kingdom to produce one fresh and living to equal it. Let me tell you I suspected Mr. Whitford, and I hinted it yesterday.'

'Did you indeed!' said Mrs. Mountstuart, humouring her excessive acuteness.

'I really did. There is that dear good man on his feet again. And looks agitated again.'

Mr. Dale had been compelled both by the lady's voice and his interest in the subject, to listen. He had listened more than enough: he was exceedingly nervous. He held on by his chair, afraid to quit his moorings, and: 'Manners!' he said to himself unconsciously aloud, as he cogitated on the libertine way with which these chartered great ladies of the district discussed his daughter. He was heard and unnoticed. The supposition, if any, would have been that he was admonishing himself.

At this juncture Sir Willoughby entered the drawing-room by the garden-window, and simultaneously Dr. Middleton by the door.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE SCENE OF SIR WILLOUGHBY'S GENERALSHIP

HISTORY, we may fear, will never know the qualities of leadership inherent in Sir Willoughby Patterne to fit him for the post of Commander of an army, seeing that

he avoided the fatigues of the service and preferred the honours bestowed in his country upon the quiet administrators of their own estates : but his possession of particular gifts, which are military, and especially of the proleptic mind, which is the stamp and sign-warrant of the heaven-sent General, was displayed on every urgent occasion when, in the midst of difficulties likely to have extinguished one less alert than he to the threatening aspect of disaster, he had to manœuvre himself.

He had received no intimation of Mr. Dale's presence in his house, nor of the arrival of the dreaded women Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer : his locked door was too great a terror to his domestics. Having finished with Vernon, after a tedious endeavour to bring the fellow to a sense of the policy of the step urged on him, he walked out on the lawn with the desire to behold the opening of an interview not promising to lead to much, and possibly to profit by its failure. Clara had been prepared, according to his directions, by Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, as Vernon had been prepared by him. His wishes, candidly and kindly expressed both to Vernon and Mrs. Mountstuart, were, that since the girl appeared disinclined to make him a happy man, she would make one of his cousin. Intimating to Mrs. Mountstuart that he would be happier without her, he alluded to the benefit of the girl's money to poor old Vernon, the general escape from a scandal if old Vernon could manage to catch her as she dropped, the harmonious arrangement it would be for all parties. And only on the condition of her taking Vernon, would he consent to give her up. This he said imperatively : adding, that such was the meaning of the news she had received relating to Lætitia Dale. From what quarter had she received it ? he asked. She shuffled in her reply, made a gesture to signify that it was in the air, universal, and fell upon the proposed arrangement. He

would listen to none of Mrs. Mountstuart's woman-of-the-world instances of the folly of pressing it upon a girl who had shown herself a girl of spirit. She foretold the failure. He would not be advised ; he said : ' It is my scheme ' ; and perhaps the look of mad benevolence about it induced the lady to try whether there was a chance that it would hit the madness in our nature, and somehow succeed or lead to a pacification. Sir Willoughby condescended to arrange things thus for Clara's good ; he would then proceed to realize his own. Such was the face he put upon it. We can wear what appearance we please before the world until we are found out, nor is the world's praise knocking upon hollowness always hollow music ; but Mrs. Mountstuart's laudation of his kindness and simplicity disturbed him ; for though he had recovered from his rebuff enough to imagine that Lætitia could not refuse him under reiterated pressure, he had let it be supposed that she was a submissive handmaiden throbbing for her elevation ; and Mrs. Mountstuart's belief in it afflicted his recent bitter experience ; his footing was not perfectly secure. Besides, assuming it to be so, he considered the sort of prize he had won ; and a spasm of downright hatred of a world for which we make mighty sacrifices to be repaid in a worn, thin, comparatively valueless coin, troubled his counting of his gains. Lætitia, it was true, had not passed through other hands in coming to him, as Vernon would know it to be Clara's case : time only had worn her : but the comfort of the reflection was annoyed by the physical contrast of the two. Hence an unusual melancholy in his tone, that Mrs. Mountstuart thought touching. It had the scenic effect on her which greatly contributes to delude the wits. She talked of him to Clara as being a man who had revealed an unsuspected depth.

Vernon took the communication curiously. He seemed

readier to be in love with his benevolent relative than with the lady. He was confused, undisguisedly moved, said the plan was impossible, out of the question, but thanked Willoughby for the best of intentions, thanked him warmly. After saying that the plan was impossible, the comical fellow allowed himself to be pushed forth on the lawn to see how Miss Middleton might have come out of her interview with Mrs. Mountstuart. Willoughby observed Mrs. Mountstuart meet him, usher him to the place she had quitted among the shrubs, and return to the open turf-spaces. He sprang to her.

‘She will listen,’ Mrs. Mountstuart said : ‘she likes him, respects him, thinks he is a very sincere friend, clever, a scholar, and a good mountaineer ; and thinks you mean very kindly. So much I have impressed on her, but I have not done much for Mr. Whitford.’

‘She consents to listen,’ said Willoughby, snatching at that as the death-blow to his friend Horace.

‘She consents to listen, because you have arranged it so that if she declined she would be rather a savage.’

‘You think it will have no result ?’

‘None at all.’

‘Her listening will do.’

‘And you must be satisfied with it.’

‘We shall see.’

‘“Anything for peace,” she says : and I don’t say that a gentleman with a tongue would not have a chance. She wishes to please you.’

‘Old Vernon has no tongue for women, poor fellow ! You will have us be spider or fly, and if a man can’t spin a web, all he can hope is not to be caught in one. She knows his history too, and that won’t be in his favour. How did she look when you left them ?’

‘Not so bright : like a bit of china that wants dusting. She looked a trifle *gauche*, it struck me ; more like a

country girl with the hoyden taming in her than the well-bred creature she is. I did not suspect her to have feeling. You must remember, Sir Willoughby, that she has obeyed your wishes, done her utmost : I do think we may say she has made some amends : and if she is to blame she repents, and you will not insist too far.'

'I do insist,' said he.

'Beneficent, but a tyrant !'

'Well, well.' He did not dislike the character.

They perceived Dr. Middleton wandering over the lawn, and Willoughby went to him to put him on the wrong track : Mrs. Mountstuart swept into the drawing-room. Willoughby quitted the Rev. Doctor, and hung about the bower where he supposed his pair of dupes had by this time ceased to stutter mutually :—or what if they had found the word of harmony ? He could bear that, just bear it. He rounded the shrubs, and behold, both had vanished. The trellis decorated emptiness. His idea was, that they had soon discovered their inability to be turtles : and desiring not to lose a moment while Clara was fretted by the scene, he rushed to the drawing-room with the hope of lighting on her there, getting her to himself, and finally, urgently, passionately offering her the sole alternative of what she had immediately rejected. Why had he not used passion before, instead of limping crippled between temper and policy ? He was capable of it : as soon as imagination in him conceived his personal feelings unwounded and unimperilled, the might of it inspired him with heroical confidence, and Clara grateful, Clara softly moved, led him to think of Clara melted. Thus anticipating her he burst into the room.

One step there warned him that he was in the jaws of the world. We have the phrase, that a man is himself,

under certain trying circumstances. There is no need to say it of Sir Willoughby : he was thrice himself when danger menaced, himself inspired him. He could read at a single glance the Polyphemus eye in the general head of a company. Lady Busshe, Lady Culmer, Mrs. Mountstuart, Mr. Dale, had a similarity in the variety of their expressions that made up one giant eye for him, perfectly, if awfully, legible. He discerned the fact that his demon secret was abroad, universal. He ascribed it to fate. He was in the jaws of the world, on the world's teeth. This time he thought Lætitia must have betrayed him, and bowing to Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer, gallantly pressing their fingers and responding to their becks and archnesses, he ruminated on his defences before he should accost her father. He did not want to be alone with the man, and he considered how his presence might be made useful.

‘ I am glad to see you, Mr. Dale. Pray, be seated. Is it nature asserting her strength ? or the efficacy of medicine ? I fancy it can't be both. You have brought us back your daughter ? ’

Mr. Dale sank into a chair, unable to resist the hand forcing him.

‘ No, Sir Willoughby, no. I have not ; I have not seen her since she came home this morning from Patterne.’

‘ Indeed ? She is unwell ? ’

‘ I cannot say. She secludes herself.’

‘ Has locked herself in,’ said Lady Busshe.

Willoughby threw her a smile. It made them intimate. This was an advantage against the world, but an exposure of himself to the abominable woman.

Dr. Middleton came up to Mr. Dale to apologize for not presenting his daughter Clara, whom he could find neither in nor out of the house.

'We have in Mr. Dale, as I suspected,' he said to Willoughby, 'a stout ally.'

'If I may beg two minutes with you, Sir Willoughby,' said Mr. Dale.

'Your visits are too rare for me to allow of your numbering the minutes,' Willoughby replied. 'We cannot let Mr. Dale escape us now that we have him, I think, Dr. Middleton.'

'Not without ransom,' said the Rev. Doctor.

Mr. Dale shook his head. 'My strength, Sir Willoughby, will not sustain me long.'

'You are at home, Mr. Dale.'

'Not far from home, in truth, but too far for an invalid beginning to grow sensible of weakness.'

'You will regard Patterne as your home, Mr. Dale,' Willoughby repeated for the world to hear.

'Unconditionally?' Dr. Middleton inquired with a humorous air of dissenting.

Willoughby gave him a look that was coldly courteous, and then he looked at Lady Busshe. She nodded imperceptibly. Her eyebrows rose, and Willoughby returned a similar nod.

Translated, the signs ran thus :

'—Pestered by the Rev. gentleman :—I see you are. Is the story I have heard correct ?—Possibly it may err in a few details.'

This was fettering himself in loose manacles.

But Lady Busshe would not be satisfied with the compliment of the intimate looks and nods. She thought she might still be behind Mrs. Mountstuart ; and she was a bold woman, and anxious about him, half-crazed by the riddle of the pot she was boiling in, and having very few minutes to spare.

Not extremely reticent by nature, privileged by station, and made intimate with him by his covert looks, she

stood up to him. 'One word to an old friend. Which is the father of the fortunate creature? I don't know how to behave to them.'

No time was afforded him to be disgusted with her vulgarity and audacity.

He replied, feeling her rivet his gyves: 'The house will be empty to-morrow.'

'I see. A decent withdrawal, and very well cloaked. We had a tale here of her running off to decline the honour, afraid, or on her dignity or something.'

How was it that the woman was ready to accept the altered posture of affairs in his house—if she had received a hint of them? He forgot that he had prepared her in self-defence.

'From whom did you have that?' he asked.

'Her father. And the lady aunts declare it was the cousin she refused!'

Willoughby's brain turned over. He righted it for action, and crossed the room to the ladies Eleanor and Isabel. His ears tingled. He and his whole story discussed in public! Himself unroofed! And the marvel that he of all men should be in such a tangle, naked and blown on, condemned to use his cunningest arts to unwind and cover himself, struck him as though the lord of his kind were running the gauntlet of a legion of imps. He felt their lashes.

The ladies were talking to Mrs. Mountstuart and Lady Culmer of Vernon and the suitableness of Lætitia to a scholar. He made sign to them, and both rose.

'It is the hour for your drive. To the cottage! Mr. Dale is ill. She must come. Her sick father! No delay, going or returning. Bring her here at once.'

'Poor man!' they sighed: and 'Willoughby,' said one, and the other said: 'There is a strange misconception you will do well to correct.'

They were about to murmur what it was. He swept his hand round, and excusing themselves to their guests, obediently they retired.

Lady Busshe at his entreaty remained, and took a seat beside Lady Culmer and Mrs. Mountstuart.

She said to the latter: 'You have tried scholars. What do you think?'

'Excellent, but hard to mix,' was the reply.

'I never make experiments,' said Lady Culmer.

'Some one must!' Mrs. Mountstuart groaned over her dull dinner-party.

Lady Busshe consoled her. 'At any rate, the loss of a scholar is no loss to the county.'

'They are well enough in towns,' Lady Culmer said.

'And then I am sure you must have them by themselves.'

'We have nothing to regret.'

'My opinion.'

The voice of Dr. Middleton in colloquy with Mr. Dale swelled on a melodious thunder: 'For whom else should I plead as the passionate advocate I proclaimed myself to you, sir? There is but one man known to me who would move me to back him upon such an adventure. Willoughby, join me. I am informing Mr. Dale . . .'

Willoughby stretched his hands out to Mr. Dale to support him on his legs, though he had shown no sign of a wish to rise.

'You are feeling unwell, Mr. Dale.'

'Do I look very ill, Sir Willoughby?'

'It will pass. Lætitia will be with us in twenty minutes.'

Mr. Dale struck his hands in a clasp. He looked alarmingly ill, and satisfactorily revealed to his host how he could be made to look so.

'I was informing Mr. Dale that the petitioner enjoys our concurrent good wishes: and mine in no degree less

than yours, Willoughby,' observed Dr. Middleton, whose billows grew the bigger for a check. He supposed himself speaking confidentially. 'Ladies have the trick; they have, I may say, the natural disposition for playing enigma now and again. Pressure is often a sovereign specific. Let it be tried upon her all round, from every radiating line of the circle. You she refuses. Then I venture to propose myself to appeal to her. My daughter has assuredly an esteem for the applicant that will animate a woman's tongue in such a case. The ladies of the house will not be backward. Lastly, if necessary, we trust the lady's father to add his instances. My prescription is, to fatigue her negatives; and where no rooted objection exists, I maintain it to be the unfailing receipt for the conduct of a siege. No woman can say No for ever. The defence has not such resources against even a single assailant, and we shall have solved the problem of continuous motion before she will have learnt to deny in perpetuity. That I stand on.'

Willoughby glanced at Mrs. Mountstuart.

'What is that?' she said. 'Treason to our sex, Dr. Middleton?'

'I think I heard, that no woman can say No for ever!' remarked Lady Busshe.

'To a loyal gentleman, ma'am: assuming the field of the recurring request to be not unholy ground; consecrated to affirmatives rather.'

Dr. Middleton was attacked by three angry bees. They made him say Yes and No alternately so many times that he had to admit in men a shiftier yieldingness than women were charged with.

Willoughby gesticulated as mute chorus on the side of the ladies; and a little show of party spirit like that, coming upon their excitement under the topic, inclined them to him genially.

He drew Mr. Dale away while the conflict subsided in sharp snaps of rifles and an interval rejoinder of a cannon.

Mr. Dale had shown by signs that he was growing fretfully restive under his burden of doubt.

'Sir Willoughby, I have a question. I beg you to lead me where I may ask it. I know my head is weak.'

'Mr. Dale, it is answered when I say that my house is your home, and that Lætitia will soon be with us.'

'Then this report is true!'

'I know nothing of reports. You are answered.'

'Can my daughter be accused of any shadow of falsehood, dishonourable dealing?'

'As little as I.'

Mr. Dale scanned his face. He saw no shadow.

'For I should go to my grave bankrupt if that could be said of her; and I have never yet felt poor, though you know the extent of a pensioner's income. Then this tale of a refusal . . . ?'

'Is nonsense.'

'She has accepted?'

'There are situations, Mr. Dale, too delicate to be clothed in positive definitions.'

'Ah, Sir Willoughby, but it becomes a father to see that his daughter is not forced into delicate situations. I hope all is well. I am confused. It may be my head. She puzzles me. You are not . . . Can I ask it here? You are quite? . . . Will you moderate my anxiety? My infirmities must excuse me.'

Sir Willoughby conveyed by a shake of the head and a pressure of Mr. Dale's hand, that he was not, and that he was quite.

'Dr. Middleton?' said Mr. Dale.

'He leaves us to-morrow.'

'Really!' The invalid wore a look as if wine had been

poured into him. He routed his host's calculations by calling to the Rev. Doctor. 'We are to lose you, sir?'

Willoughby attempted an interposition, but Dr. Middleton crashed through it like the lordly organ swallowing a flute.

'Not before I score my victory, Mr. Dale, and establish my friend upon his rightful throne.'

'You do not leave to-morrow, sir?'

'Have you heard, sir, that I leave to-morrow?'

Mr. Dale turned to Sir Willoughby.

The latter said: 'Clara named to-day. To-morrow, I thought preferable.'

'Ah?' Dr. Middleton towered on the swelling exclamation, but with no dark light. He radiated splendidly. 'Yes, then, to-morrow. That is, if we subdue the lady.'

He advanced to Willoughby, seized his hand, squeezed it, thanked him, praised him. He spoke under his breath, for a wonder; but: 'We are in your debt lastingly, my friend,' was heard, and he was impressive, he seemed subdued, and saying aloud; 'Though I should wish to aid in the reduction of that fortress,' he let it be seen that his mind was rid of a load.

Dr. Middleton partly stupefied Willoughby by his way of taking it, but his conduct was too serviceable to allow of speculation on his readiness to break the match. It was the turning-point of the engagement.

Lady Busshe made a stir.

'I cannot keep my horses waiting any longer,' she said, and beckoned. Sir Willoughby was beside her immediately. 'You are admirable! perfect! Don't ask me to hold my tongue. I retract, I recant. It is a fatality. I have resolved upon that view. You could stand the shot of beauty, not of brains. That is our report. There! And it's delicious to feel that the county wins you. No

tea. I cannot possibly wait. And, oh ! here she is. I must have a look at her. My dear Lætitia Dale !'

Willoughby hurried to Mr. Dale.

'You are not to be excited, sir : compose yourself. You will recover and be strong to-morrow : you are at home ; you are in your own house ; you are in Lætitia's drawing-room. All will be clear to-morrow. Till to-morrow we talk riddles by consent. Sit, I beg. You stay with us.'

He met Lætitia and rescued her from Lady Busshe, murmuring, with the air of a lover who says, 'my love ! my sweet !' that she had done rightly to come and come at once.

Her father had been thrown into the proper condition of clammy nervousness to create the impression. Lætitia's anxiety sat prettily on her long eyelashes as she bent over him in his chair.

Hereupon Dr. Corney appeared ; and his name had a bracing effect on Mr. Dale. 'Corney has come to drive me to the cottage,' he said. 'I am ashamed of this public exhibition of myself, my dear. Let us go. My head is a poor one.'

Dr. Corney had been intercepted. He broke from Sir Willoughby with a dozen little nods of accurate understanding of him, even to beyond the mark of the communications. He touched his patient's pulse lightly, briefly sighed with professional composure, and pronounced : 'Rest. Must not be moved. No, no, nothing serious,' he quieted Lætitia's fears, 'but rest, rest. A change of residence for a night will tone him. I will bring him a draught in the course of the evening. Yes, yes, I'll fetch everything wanted from the cottage for you and for him. Repose on Corney's forethought.'

'You are sure, Dr. Corney ?' said Lætitia, frightened on her father's account and on her own.

‘Which aspect will be the best for Mr. Dale’s bedroom?’ the hospitable ladies Eleanor and Isabel inquired.

‘South-east, decidedly: let him have the morning sun: a warm air, a vigorous air and a bright air, and the patient wakes and sings in his bed.’

Still doubtful whether she was in a trap, Lætitia whispered to her father of the privacy and comforts of his home.

He replied to her that he thought he would rather be in his own home.

Dr. Corney positively pronounced No to it.

Lætitia breathed again of home, but with the sigh of one overborne.

The ladies Eleanor and Isabel took the word from Willoughby, and said: ‘But you are at home, my dear. This is your home. Your father will be at least as well attended here as at the cottage.’

She raised her eyelids on them mournfully, and by chance diverted her look to Dr. Middleton, quite by chance.

It spoke eloquently to the assembly of all that Willoughby desired to be imagined.

‘But there is Crossjay,’ she cried. ‘My cousin has gone, and the boy is left alone. I cannot have him left alone. If we, if, Dr. Corney, you are sure it is unsafe for papa to be moved to-day, Crossjay must . . . he cannot be left.’

‘Bring him with you, Corney,’ said Sir Willoughby: and the little doctor heartily promised that he would, in the event of his finding Crossjay at the cottage, which he thought a distant probability.

‘He gave me his word he would not go out till my return,’ said Lætitia.

‘And if Crossjay gave you his word,’ the accents of a

new voice vibrated close by, 'be certain that he will not come back with Dr. Corney unless he has authority in your handwriting.'

Clara Middleton stepped gently to Lætitia, and with a manner that was an embrace, as much as kissed her for what she was doing on behalf of Crossjay. She put her lips in a pouting form to simulate saying : 'Press it.'

'He is to come,' said Lætitia.

'Then, write him his permit.'

There was a chatter about Crossjay and the sentinel true to his post that he could be, during which Lætitia distressfully scribbled a line for Dr. Corney to deliver to him. Clara stood near. She had rebuked herself for a want of reserve in the presence of Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer, and she was guilty of a slightly excessive containment when she next addressed Lætitia. It was, like Lætitia's look at Dr. Middleton, opportune : enough to make a man who watched as Willoughby did, a fatalist for life : the shadow of a difference in her bearing toward Lætitia sufficed to impute acting either to her present coolness or her previous warmth. Better still, when Dr. Middleton said : 'So we leave to-morrow, my dear, and I hope you have written to the Darletons,' Clara flushed and beamed, and repressed her animation on a sudden, with one grave look, that might be thought regretful, to where Willoughby stood.

Chance works for us when we are good captains.

Willoughby's pride was high, though he knew himself to be keeping it up like a fearfully dexterous juggler, and for an empty reward : but he was in the toils of the world.

'Have you written ? The post-bag leaves in half an hour,' he addressed her.

'We are expected, but I will write,' she replied : and her not having yet written counted in his favour.

She went to write the letter. Dr. Corney had departed on his mission to fetch Crossjay and medicine. Lady Busshe was impatient to be gone. 'Corney,' she said to Lady Culmer, 'is a deadly gossip.'

'Inveterate,' was the answer.

'My poor horses !'

'Not the young pair of bays ?'

'Luckily, my dear. And don't let me hear of dining to-night !'

Sir Willoughby was leading out Mr. Dale to a quiet room, contiguous to the invalid gentleman's bed-chamber. He resigned him to Lætitia in the hall, that he might have the pleasure of conducting the ladies to their carriage.

'As little agitation as possible. Corney will soon be back,' he said, bitterly admiring the graceful subservience of Lætitia's figure to her father's weight on her arm.

He had won a desperate battle, but what had he won ? What had the world given him in return for his efforts to gain it ? Just a shirt, it might be said : simple scanty clothing, no warmth. Lady Busshe was unbearable ; she gabbled ; she was ill-bred, permitted herself to speak of Dr. Middleton as ineligible, no loss to the county. And Mrs. Mountstuart was hardly much above her, with her inevitable stroke of caricature :—' You see Dr. Middleton's pulpit scampering after him with legs !' Perhaps the Rev. Doctor did punish the world for his having forsaken his pulpit, and might be conceived as haunted by it at his heels, but Willoughby was in the mood to abhor comic images : he hated the perpetrators of them and the grinners. Contempt of this laughing empty world, for which he had performed a monstrous immolation, led him to associate Dr. Middleton in his mind, and Clara too, with the desirable things he had sacrificed—a shape of youth and health ; a sparkling companion ; a face of innumerable charms ; and his own veracity ; his inner

sense of his dignity ; and his temper, and the limpid frankness of his air of scorn, that was to him a visage of candid happiness in the dim retrospect. Haply also he had sacrificed more ; he looked scientifically into the future : he might have sacrificed a nameless more. And for what ? he asked again. For the favourable looks and tongues of these women whose looks and tongues he detested !

‘ Dr. Middleton says he is indebted to me : I am deeply in *his* debt,’ he remarked.

‘ It is we who are in *your* debt for a lovely romance, my dear Sir Willoughby,’ said Lady Busshe, incapable of taking a correction, so thoroughly had he imbued her with his fiction, or with the belief that she had a good story to circulate.

Away she drove rattling her tongue to Lady Culmer.

‘ A hat and horn, and she would be in the old figure of a post-boy on a hue-and-cry sheet,’ said Mrs. Mountstuart.

Willoughby thanked the great lady for her services, and she complimented the polished gentleman on his noble self-possession. But she complained at the same time of being defrauded of her ‘ charmer ’ Colonel De Craye since luncheon. An absence of warmth in her compliment caused Willoughby to shrink and think the wretched shirt he had got from the world no covering after all : a breath flapped it.

‘ He comes to me, to-morrow, I believe,’ she said, reflecting on her superior knowledge of facts in comparison with Lady Busshe, who would presently be hearing of something novel, and exclaiming : ‘ So, *that* is why you patronized the colonel ! ’ And it was nothing of the sort, for Mrs. Mountstuart could honestly say she was not the woman to make a business of her pleasure.

‘ Horace is an enviable fellow,’ said Willoughby, wise in The Book, which bids us ever, for an assuagement, to

fancy our friend's condition worse than our own, and recommends the deglutition of irony as the most balsamic for wounds in the whole moral pharmacopœia.

'I don't know,' she replied with a marked accent of deliberation.

'The colonel is to have you to himself to-morrow!'

'I can't be sure of what I shall have in the colonel!'

'Your perpetual sparkler?'

Mrs. Mountstuart set her head in motion. She left the matter silent.

'I'll come for him in the morning,' she said, and her carriage whirled her off.

Either she had guessed it, or Clara had confided to her the treacherous passion of Horace De Craye!

However, the world was shut away from Patterne for the night.

CHAPTER XLVII

SIR WILLOUGHBY AND HIS FRIEND HORACE DE CRAYE

WILLOUGHBY shut himself up in his laboratory to brood awhile after the conflict. Sounding through himself, as it was habitual with him to do, for the plan most agreeable to his taste, he came on a strange discovery among the lower circles of that microcosm. He was no longer guided in his choice by liking and appetite: he had to put it on the edge of a sharp discrimination and try it by his acutest judgement before it was acceptable to his heart: and knowing well the direction of his desire, he was nevertheless unable to run two strides on a wish. He had learnt to read the world: his partial capacity for reading persons had fled. The mysteries of his own bosom were bare to him; but he could comprehend

them only in their immediate relation to the world outside. This hateful world had caught him and transformed him to a machine. The discovery he made was, that in the gratification of the egoistic instinct we may so beset ourselves as to deal a slaughtering wound upon Self to whatsoever quarter we turn.

Surely there is nothing stranger in mortal experience. The man was confounded. At the game of Chess it is the dishonour of our adversary when we are stale-mated : but in life, combating the world, such a winning of the game questions our sentiments.

Willoughby's interpretation of his discovery was directed by pity : he had no other strong emotion left in him. He pitied himself, and he reached the conclusion that he suffered because he was active ; he could not be quiescent. Had it not been for his devotion to his house and name, never would he have stood twice the victim of womankind. Had he been selfish, he would have been the happiest of men ! He said it aloud. He schemed benevolently for his unborn young, and for the persons about him : hence he was in a position forbidding a step under pain of injury to his feelings. He was generous : otherwise would he not in scorn of soul, at the outset, straight off, have pitched Clara Middleton to the wanton winds ? He was faithful in affection : Lætitia Dale was beneath his roof to prove it. Both these women were examples of his power of forgiveness, and now a tender word to Clara might fasten shame on him—such was her gratitude ! And if he did not marry Lætitia, laughter would be devilish all around him—such was the world's ! Probably Vernon would not long be thankful for the chance which varied the monotony of his days. What of Horace ? Willoughby stripped to enter the ring with Horace : he cast away disguise. That man had been the first to divide him in the all but equal slices of his

egoistic from his amatory self : murder of his individuality was the crime of Horace De Craye. And further, suspicion fixed on Horace (he knew not how, except that The Book bids us be suspicious of those we hate) as the man who had betrayed his recent dealings with Lætitia.

Willoughby walked the thoroughfares of the house to meet Clara and make certain of her either for himself or, if it must be, for Vernon, before he took another step with Lætitia Dale. Clara could reunite him, turn him once more into a whole and an animated man ; and she might be willing. Her willingness to listen to Vernon promised it. 'A gentleman with a tongue would have a chance,' Mrs. Mountstuart had said. How much greater the chance of a lover ! For he had not yet supplicated her : he had shown pride and temper. He could woo, he was a torrential wooer. And it would be glorious to swing round on Lady Busshe and the world, with Clara nestling under an arm, and protest astonishment at the erroneous and utterly unfounded anticipations of any other development. And it would righteously punish Lætitia.

Clara came downstairs, bearing her letter to Miss Darleton.

'*Must* it be posted ?' Willoughby said, meeting her in the hall.

'They expect us any day, but it will be more comfortable for papa,' was her answer. She looked kindly in her new shyness.

She did not seem to think he had treated her contemptuously in flinging her to his cousin, which was odd.

'You have seen Vernon ?'

'It was your wish.'

'You had a talk ?'

'We conversed.'

'A long one ?'

'We walked some distance.'

‘ Clara, I tried to make the best arrangement I could.’

‘ Your intention was generous.’

‘ He took no advantage of it ? ’

‘ It could not be treated seriously.’

‘ It was meant seriously.’

‘ There I see the generosity.’

Willoughby thought this encomium, and her consent to speak on the subject, and her scarcely embarrassed air and richness of tone in speaking, very strange : and strange was her taking him quite in earnest. Apparently she had no feminine sensation of the unwontedness and the absurdity of the matter !

‘ But, Clara ! am I to understand that he did not speak out ? ’

‘ We are excellent friends.’

‘ To miss it, though his chance were the smallest ! ’

‘ You forget that it may not wear that appearance to him.’

‘ He spoke not one word of himself ? ’

‘ No.’

‘ Ah ! the poor old fellow was taught to see it was hopeless—chilled. May I plead ? Will you step into the laboratory for a minute ? We are two sensible persons . . . ’

‘ Pardon me, I must go to papa.’

‘ Vernon’s personal history perhaps . . . ? ’

‘ I think it honourable to him.’

‘ Honourable !—’hem ! ’

‘ By comparison.’

‘ Comparison with what ? ’

‘ With others.’

He drew up to relieve himself of a critical and condemnatory expiration of a certain length. This young lady knew too much. But how physically exquisite she was !

‘ Could you, Clara, could you promise me—I hold to it.

I must have it, I know his shy tricks—promise me to give him ultimately another chance ? Is the idea repulsive to you ? ’

‘ It is one not to be thought of.’

‘ It is not repulsive ? ’

‘ Nothing could be repulsive in Mr. Whitford.’

‘ I have no wish to annoy you, Clara.’

‘ I feel bound to listen to you, Willoughby. Whatever I can do to please you, I will. It is my life-long duty.’

‘ Could you, Clara, could you conceive it, could you simply conceive it ;—give him your hand ? ’

‘ As a friend, Oh ! yes.’

‘ In marriage.’

She paused. She, so penetrative of him when he opposed her, was hoodwinked when he softened her feelings : for the heart,—though the clearest, is not the most constant instructor of the head ; the heart, unlike the often obtuser head, works for itself and not for the commonwealth.

‘ You are so kind . . . I would do much . . . ’ she said.

‘ Would you accept him—marry him ? He is poor.’

‘ I am not ambitious of wealth.’

‘ *Would* you marry him ? ’

‘ Marriage is not in my thoughts.’

‘ But could you marry him ? ’

Willoughby expected no. In his expectation of it he hung inflated.

She said these words : ‘ I could engage to marry no one else.’

His amazement breathed without a syllable.

He flapped his arms, resembling for the moment those birds of enormous body which attempt a rise upon their wings and achieve a hop.

‘ Would you engage it ? ’ he said, content to see himself

stepped on as an insect if he could but feel the agony of his false friend Horace—their common pretensions to win her were now of that comparative size.

‘ Oh ! there can be no necessity. And an oath—no ! ’ said Clara, inwardly shivering at a recollection.

‘ But you could ? ’

‘ My wish is to please you. ’

‘ You could ? ’

‘ I said so. ’

It has been known of the patriotic mountaineer of a hoary pile of winters, with little life remaining in him, but that little on fire for his country, that by the brink of the precipice he has flung himself on a young and lusty invader, dedicating himself exultingly to death if only he may score a point for his country by extinguishing in his country’s enemy the stronger man. So likewise did Willoughby, in the blow that deprived him of hope, exult in the toppling over of Horace De Craye. They perished together, but which one sublimely relished the headlong descent ? And Vernon taken by Clara would be Vernon simply tolerated. And Clara taken by Vernon would be Clara previously touched, smirched. Altogether he could enjoy his fall.

It was at least upon a comfortable bed, where his pride would be dressed daily and would never be disagreeably treated.

He was henceforth Lætitia’s own. The bell telling of Dr. Corney’s return was a welcome sound to Willoughby, and he said good-humouredly : ‘ Wait, Clara, you will see your hero Crossjay. ’

Crossjay and Dr. Corney tumbled into the hall. Willoughby caught Crossjay under the arms to give him a lift in the old fashion pleasing to Clara to see. The boy was heavy as lead.

‘ I had work to hook him and worse to net him, ’ said

Dr. Corney. 'I had to make him believe he was to nurse every soul in the house, you among them, Miss Middleton.'

Willoughby pulled the boy aside.

Crossjay came back to Clara heavier in looks than his limbs had been. She dropped her letter in the hall-box, and took his hand to have a private hug of him. When they were alone, she said: 'Crossjay, my dear, my dear! You look unhappy.'

'Yes, and who wouldn't be, and you're not to marry Sir Willoughby!' his voice threatened a cry. 'I know you're not, for Dr. Corney says you are going to leave.'

'Did you so very much wish it, Crossjay?'

'I should have seen a lot of you, and I shan't see you at all, and I'm sure if I'd known I wouldn't have——, and he has been and tipped me this.'

Crossjay opened his fist in which lay three gold pieces.

'That was very kind of him,' said Clara.

'Yes, but how can I keep it?'

'By handing it to Mr. Whitford to keep for you.'

'Yes, but, Miss Middleton, oughtn't I to tell him? I mean Sir Willoughby.'

'What?'

'Why, that I,' Crossjay got close to her, 'why, that I, that I—you know what you used to say. I wouldn't tell a lie, but oughtn't I, without his asking . . . and this money! I don't mind being turned out again.'

'Consult Mr. Whitford,' said Clara.

'I know what you think, though.'

'Perhaps you had better not say anything at present, dear boy.'

'But what am I to do with this money?'

Crossjay held the gold pieces out as things that had not yet mingled with his ideas of possession.

'I listened, and I told of him,' he said. 'I couldn't help listening, but I went and told; and I don't like being

here, and his money, and he not knowing what I did. Haven't you heard? I'm certain I know what you think, and so do I, and I must take my luck, I'm always in mischief, getting into a mess or getting out of it. I don't mind, I really don't, Miss Middleton, I can sleep in a tree quite comfortably. If you're not going to be here, I'd just as soon be anywhere. I must try to earn my living some day. And why not a cabin-boy? Sir Cloudesley Shovel was no better. And I don't mind his being wrecked at last, if you're drowned an admiral. So I shall go and ask him to take his money back, and if he asks me I shall tell him, and there. You know what it is: I guessed that from what Dr. Corney said. I'm sure I know you're thinking what's manly. Fancy me keeping his money, and you not marrying him! I wouldn't mind driving a plough. I shouldn't make a bad gamekeeper. Of course I love boats best, but you can't have everything.'

'Speak to Mr. Whitford first,' said Clara, too proud of the boy for growing as she had trained him, to advise a course of conduct opposed to his notions of manliness, though now that her battle was over she would gladly have acquiesced in little casuistic compromises for the sake of the general peace.

Some time later Vernon and Dr. Corney were arguing upon the question. Corney was dead against the sentimental view of the morality of the case propounded by Vernon as coming from Miss Middleton and partly shared by him. 'If it's on the boy's mind,' Vernon said, 'I can't prohibit his going to Willoughby and making a clean breast of it, especially as it involves me, and sooner or later I should have to tell him myself.'

Dr. Corney said no at all points. 'Now hear me,' he said finally. 'This is between ourselves, and no breach of confidence, which I'd not be guilty of for forty friends,

though I 'd give my hand from the wrist-joint for one—my left, that 's to say. Sir Willoughby puts me one or two searching interrogations on a point of interest to him, his house and name. Very well, and good-night to that, and I wish Miss Dale had been ten years younger, or had passed the ten with no heartrisings and sinkings wearing to the tissues of the frame and the moral fibre to boot. She 'll have a fairish health, with a little occasional doctoring ; taking her rank and wealth in right earnest, and shying her pen back to Mother Goose. She 'll do. And, by the way, I think it 's to the credit of my sagacity that I fetched Mr. Dale here fully primed, and roused the neighbourhood, which I did, and so fixed our gentleman, neat as a prodded eel on a pair of prongs—namely, the positive fact and the general knowledge of it. But mark me, my friend. We understand one another at a nod. This boy, young Squire Crossjay, is a good stiff hearty kind of a Saxon boy, out of whom you may cut as gallant a fellow as ever wore epaulettes. I like him, you like him, Miss Dale and Miss Middleton like him ; and Sir Willoughby Patterne of Patterne Hall and other places won't be indisposed to like him mightily in the event of the sun being seen to shine upon him with a particular determination to make him appear a prominent object, because a solitary, and a Patterne.' Dr. Corney lifted his chest and his finger : ' Now, mark me, and verbum sap : Crossjay must not offend Sir Willoughby. I say no more. Look ahead. Miracles happen, but it 's best to reckon that they won't. Well, now, and Miss Dale. She 'll not be cruel.'

' It appears as if she would,' said Vernon, meditating on the cloudy sketch Dr. Corney had drawn.

' She can't, my friend. Her position 's precarious ; her father has little besides a pension. And her writing damages her health. She can't. And she likes the

baronet. Oh, it 's only a little fit of proud blood. She 's the woman for him. She 'll manage him—give him an idea that he has got a lot of ideas. It 'd kill her father if she was obstinate. He talked to me, when I told him of the business, about his dream fulfilled, and if the dream turns to vapour, he 'll be another example that we hang more upon dreams than realities for nourishment, and medicine too. Last week I couldn't have got him out of his house with all my art and science. Oh, she 'll come round. Her father prophesied this, and I 'll prophesy that. She 's fond of him.'

'She was.'

'She sees through him?'

'Without quite doing justice to him now,' said Vernon.

'He can be generous—in his way.'

'How?' Corney inquired, and was informed that he should hear in time to come.

Meanwhile Colonel De Craye, after hovering over the park and about the cottage for the opportunity of pouncing on Miss Middleton alone, had returned, crest-fallen for once, and plumped into Willoughby's hands.

'My dear Horace,' Willoughby said, 'I 've been looking for you all the afternoon. The fact is—I fancy you 'll think yourself lured down here on false pretences: but the truth is, I am not so much to blame as the world will suppose. In point of fact, to be brief, Miss Dale and I . . . I never consult other men how they would have acted. The fact of the matter is, Miss Middleton . . . I fancy you have partly guessed it.'

'Partly,' said De Craye.

'Well, she has a liking that way, and if it should turn out strong enough, it 's the best arrangement I can think of.'

The lively play of the colonel's features fixed in a blank inquiry.

‘One can back a good friend for making a good husband,’ said Willoughby. ‘I could not break with her in the present stage of affairs without seeing to that. And I can speak of her highly, though she and I have seen in time that we do not suit one another. My wife must have brains.’

‘I have always thought it,’ said Colonel De Craye, glistening and looking hungry as a wolf through his wonderment.

‘There will not be a word against her, you understand. You know my dislike of tattle and gossip. However, let it fall on me ; my shoulders are broad. I have done my utmost to persuade her, and there seems a likelihood of her consenting. She tells me her wish is to please me, and this will please me.’

‘Certainly. Who’s the gentleman ?’

‘My best friend, I tell you. I could hardly have proposed another. Allow this business to go on smoothly just now.’

There was an uproar within the colonel to blind his wits, and Willoughby looked so friendly that it was possible to suppose the man of projects had mentioned his best friend to Miss Middleton.

And who was the best friend ?

Not having accused himself of treachery, the quick-eyed colonel was duped.

‘Have you his name handy, Willoughby ?’

‘That would be unfair to him at present, Horace—ask yourself—and to her. Things are in a ticklish posture at present. Don’t be hasty.’

‘Certainly. I don’t ask. Initials’ll do.’

‘You have a remarkable aptitude for guessing, Horace, and this case offers you no tough problem—if ever you acknowledge toughness. I have a regard for her and for him—for both pretty equally ; you know I have, and

I should be thoroughly thankful to bring the matter about.'

'Lordly !' said De Craye.

'I don't see it. I call it sensible.'

'Oh ! undoubtedly. The style, I mean. Tolerably antique ?'

'Novel, I should say, and not the worse for that. We want plain practical dealings between men and women. Usually we go the wrong way to work. And I loathe sentimental rubbish.'

De Craye hummed an air. 'But the lady ?' said he.

'I told you, there seems a likelihood of her consenting.'

Willoughby's fish gave a perceptible little leap now that he had been taught to exercise his aptitude for guessing.

'Without any of the customary preliminaries on the side of the gentleman ?' he said.

'We must put him through his paces, friend Horace. He's a notorious blunderer with women ; hasn't a word for them, never marked a conquest.'

De Craye crested his plumes under the agreeable banter. He presented a face humourously sceptical.

'The lady is positively not indisposed to give the poor fellow a hearing ?'

'I have cause to think she is not,' said Willoughby, glad of acting the indifference to her which could talk of her inclinations.

'Cause ?'

'Good cause.'

'Bless us !'

'As good as one can have with a woman.'

'Ah ?'

'I assure you.'

'Ah ! Does it seem like her, though ?'

'Well, she wouldn't engage herself to accept him.'

‘ Well, that seems more like her.’

‘ But she said she could engage to marry no one else.’

The colonel sprang up, crying : ‘ Clara Middleton said it ? ’ He curbed himself. ‘ That ’s a bit of wonderful compliancy.’

‘ She wishes to please me. We separate on those terms. And I wish her happiness. I ’ve developed a heart lately and taken to think of others.’

‘ Nothing better. You appear to make cock sure of the other party—our friend ? ’

‘ You know him too well, Horace, to doubt his readiness.’

‘ Do *you*, Willoughby ? ’

‘ She has money and good looks. Yes, I can say I do.’

‘ It wouldn’t be much of a man who ’d want hard pulling to that lighted altar ! ’

‘ And if he requires persuasion, you and I, Horace, might bring him to his senses.’

‘ Kicking, ’twould be ! ’

‘ I like to see everybody happy about me,’ said Willoughby, naming the hour as time to dress for dinner.

The sentiment he had delivered was De Craye’s excuse for grasping his hand and complimenting him ; but the colonel betrayed himself by doing it with an extreme fervour almost tremulous.

‘ When shall we hear more ? ’ he said.

‘ Oh, probably to-morrow,’ said Willoughby. ‘ Don’t be in such a hurry.’

‘ I ’m an infant asleep ! ’ the colonel replied, departing.

He resembled one, to Willoughby’s mind : or a traitor drugged.

‘ There is a fellow I thought had some brains ! ’

Who are not fools to be set spinning if we choose to whip them with their vanity ! It is the consolation of the great to watch them spin. But the pleasure is loftier,

and may comfort our unmerited misfortune for a while, in making a false friend drunk.

Willoughby, among his many preoccupations, had the satisfaction of seeing the effect of drunkenness on Horace De Craye when the latter was in Clara's presence. He could have laughed. Cut in keen epigram were the marginal notes added by him to that chapter of *The Book* which treats of friends and a woman : and had he not been profoundly preoccupied, troubled by recent intelligence communicated by the ladies, his aunts, he would have played the two together for the royal amusement afforded him by his friend Horace.

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE LOVERS

THE hour was close upon eleven at night. Lætitia sat in the room adjoining her father's bed-chamber. Her elbow was on the table beside her chair, and two fingers pressed her temples. The state between thinking and feeling, when both are molten and flow by us, is one of our nature's intermissions, coming after thought has quieted the fiery nerves, and can do no more. She seemed to be meditating. She was conscious only of a struggle past.

She answered a tap at the door, and raised her eyes on Clara.

Clara stepped softly. ' Mr. Dale is asleep ? '

' I hope so.'

' Ah ! dear friend.'

Lætitia let her hand be pressed.

' Have you had a pleasant evening ? '

' Mr. Whitford and papa have gone to the library.'

‘Colonel De Craye has been singing?’

‘Yes—with a voice! I thought of you upstairs, but could not ask him to sing piano.’

‘He is probably exhilarated.’

‘One would suppose it: he sang well.’

‘You are not aware of any reason?’

‘It cannot concern me.’

Clara was in rosy colour, but could meet a steady gaze.

‘And Crossjay has gone to bed?’

‘Long since. He was at dessert. He would not touch anything.’

‘He is a strange boy.’

‘Not very strange, Lætitia.’

‘He did not come to me to wish me good night.’

‘That is not strange.’

‘It is his habit at the cottage and here; and he professes to like me.’

‘Oh! he does. I may have wakened his enthusiasm, but you he loves.’

‘Why do you say it is not strange, Clara?’

‘He fears you a little.’

‘And why should Crossjay fear me?’

‘Dear, I will tell you. Last night—You will forgive him, for it was by accident: his own bed-room door was locked and he ran down to the drawing-room and curled himself up on the ottoman, and fell asleep, under that padded silken coverlet of the ladies—boots and all, I am afraid!’

Lætitia profited by this absurd allusion, thanking Clara in her heart for the refuge.

‘He should have taken off his boots,’ she said.

‘He slept there, and woke up. Dear, he meant no harm. Next day he repeated what he had heard. You will blame him. He meant well in his poor boy’s head. And now it is over the county. Ah! do not frown.’

‘That explains Lady Busshe!’ exclaimed Lætitia.

‘Dear, dear friend,’ said Clara. ‘Why—I presume on your tenderness for me; but let me: to-morrow I go—why will you reject your happiness? Those kind good ladies are deeply troubled. They say your resolution is inflexible; you resist their entreaties and your father’s. Can it be that you have any doubt of the strength of this attachment? I have none. I have never had a doubt that it was the strongest of his feelings. If before I go I could see you . . . both happy, I should be relieved, I should rejoice.’

Lætitia said quietly: ‘Do you remember a walk we had one day together to the cottage?’

Clara put up her hands with the motion of intending to stop her ears.

‘Before I go!’ said she. ‘If I might know this was to be, which all desire, before I leave, I should not feel as I do now. I long to see you happy . . . him, yes, him too. Is it like asking you to pay my debt? Then, please! But, no; I am not more than partly selfish on this occasion. He has won my gratitude. He can be really generous.’

‘An Egoist?’

‘Who is?’

‘You have forgotten our conversation on the day of our walk to the cottage?’

‘Help me to forget it—that day, and those days, and all those days! I should be glad to think I passed a time beneath the earth, and have risen again. I was the Egoist. I am sure, if I had been buried, I should not have stood up seeing myself more vilely stained, soiled, disfigured—oh! Help me to forget my conduct, Lætitia. He and I were unsuited—and I remember I blamed myself then. You and he are not: and now I can perceive the pride that can be felt in him. The worst that can be said is, that he schemes too much.’

‘Is there any fresh scheme?’ said Lætitia.

The rose came over Clara’s face.

‘You have not heard? It was impossible, but it was kindly intended. Judging by my own feeling at this moment, I can understand his. We love to see our friends established.’

Lætitia bowed. ‘My curiosity is piqued, of course.’

‘Dear friend, to-morrow we shall be parted. I trust to be thought of by you as a little better in grain than I have appeared, and my reason for trusting it is, that I know I have been always honest—a boorish young woman in my stupid mad impatience; but not insincere. It is no lofty ambition to desire to be remembered in that character, but such is your Clara, she discovers. I will tell you. It is his wish . . . his wish that I should promise to give my hand to Mr. Whitford. You see the kindness.’

Lætitia’s eyes widened and fixed:

‘You think it kindness?’

‘The intention. He sent Mr. Whitford to me, and I was taught to expect him.’

‘Was that quite kind to Mr. Whitford?’

‘What an impression I must have made on you during that walk to the cottage, Lætitia! I do not wonder; I was in a fever.’

‘You consented to listen?’

‘I really did. It astonishes me now, but I thought I could not refuse.’

‘My poor friend Vernon Whitford tried a love speech.’

‘He? no: Oh! no.’

‘You discouraged him?’

‘I? no.’

‘Gently, I mean.’

‘No.’

‘Surely you did not dream of trifling? He has a deep heart.’

‘ Has he ? ’

‘ You ask that : and you know something of him.’

‘ He did not expose it to me, dear : not even the surface of the mighty deep.’

Lætitia knitted her brows.

‘ No,’ said Clara, ‘ not a coquette : she is not a coquette, I assure you.’

With a laugh, Lætitia replied : ‘ You have still the “ dreadful power ” you made me feel that day.’

‘ I wish I could use it to good purpose ! ’

‘ He did not speak ? ’

‘ Of Switzerland, Tyrol, the Iliad, Antigone.’

‘ That was all ? ’

‘ No, Political Economy. Our situation, you will own, was unexampled : or mine was. Are you interested in me ? ’

‘ I should be, if I knew your sentiments.’

‘ I was grateful to Sir Willoughby : grieved for Mr. Whitford.’

‘ Real grief ? ’

‘ Because the task imposed on him of showing me politely that he did not enter into his cousin’s ideas, was evidently very great, extremely burdensome.’

‘ You, so quick-eyed in some things, Clara ! ’

‘ He felt for me. I saw that, in his avoidance of . . . And he was, as he always is, pleasant. We rambled over the park for I know not how long, though it did not seem long.’

‘ Never touching that subject ? ’

‘ Not ever neighbouring it, dear. A gentleman should esteem the girl he would ask . . . certain questions. I fancy he has a liking for me as a volatile friend.’

‘ If he had offered himself ? ’

‘ Despising me ? ’

‘ You can be childish, Clara. Probably you delight to tease. He had his time of it, and it is now my turn.’

‘ But he must despise me a little.’

‘ Are you blind ? ’

‘ Perhaps, dear, we both are, a little.’

The ladies looked deeper into one another.

‘ Will you answer me ? ’ said Lætitia.

‘ Your if ? If he had, it would have been an act of condescension.’

‘ You are too slippery.’

‘ Stay, dear Lætitia. He was considerate in forbearing to pain me.’

‘ That is an answer. You allowed him to perceive that it would have pained you.’

‘ Dearest, if I may convey to you what I was, in a simile for comparison : I think I was like a fisherman’s float on the water, perfectly still, and ready to go down at any instant, or up. So much for my behaviour.’

‘ Similes have the merit of satisfying the finder of them, and cheating the hearer,’ said Lætitia. ‘ You admit that your feelings would have been painful.’

‘ I was a fisherman’s float : please, admire my simile : any way you like, this way or that, or so quiet as to tempt the eyes to go to sleep. And suddenly I might have disappeared in the depths, or flown in the air. But no fish bit.’

‘ Well, then, to follow you, supposing the fish or the fisherman, for I don’t know which is which . . . Oh ! no, no : this is too serious for imagery. I am to understand that you thanked him at least for his reserve.’

‘ Yes.’

‘ Without the slightest encouragement to him to break it ? ’

‘ A fisherman’s float, Lætitia ! ’

Baffled and sighing, Lætitia kept silence for a space.

The simile chafed her wits with a suspicion of a meaning hidden in it.

‘ If he had spoken ? ’ she said.

‘ He is too truthful a man.’

‘ And the railings of men at pussy women who wind about and will not be brought to a mark, become intelligible to me.’

‘ Then, Lætitia, if he had spoken, if, and one could have imagined him sincere . . .’

‘ So truthful a man ? ’

‘ I am looking at myself. If !—why, then, I should have burnt to death with shame. Where have I read ?—some story—of an inextinguishable spark. That would have been shot into my heart.’

‘ Shame, Clara ? You are free.’

‘ As much as remains of me.’

‘ I could imagine a certain shame, in such a position, where there was no feeling but pride.’

‘ I could not imagine it where there was no feeling but pride.’

Lætitia mused : ‘ And you dwell on the kindness of a proposition so extraordinary ! ’ Gaining some light, impatiently she cried : ‘ Vernon loves you.’

‘ Do not say it ! ’

‘ I have seen it.’

‘ I have never had a sign of it.’

‘ There is the proof.’

‘ When it might have been shown again and again ! ’

‘ The greater proof ! ’

‘ Why did he not speak when he was privileged ?—strangely, but privileged.’

‘ He feared.’

‘ Me ? ’

‘ Feared to wound you—and himself as well, possibly. Men may be pardoned for thinking of themselves in these cases.’

‘ But why should he fear ? ’

‘That another was dearer to you?’

‘What cause had I given . . . Ah! see! He could fear that; suspect it! See his opinion of me! Can he care for such a girl? Abuse me, Lætitia. I should like a good round of abuse. I need purification by fire. What have I been in this house? I have a sense of whirling through it like a madwoman. And to be loved, after it all!—No! we must be hearing a tale of an antiquary prizing a battered relic of the battle-field that no one else would look at. To be loved, I see, is to feel our littleness, hollowness—feel shame. We come out in all our spots. Never to have given me one sign, when a lover would have been so tempted! Let me be incredulous, my own dear Lætitia. Because he is a man of honour, you would say! But are you unconscious of the torture you inflict? For if I am—you say it—loved by this gentleman, what an object it is he loves!—that has gone clamouring about more immodestly than women will bear to hear of, and she herself to think of! Oh! I have seen my own heart. It is a frightful spectre. I have seen a weakness in me that would have carried me anywhere. And truly I shall be charitable to women—I have gained that. But, loved! by Vernon Whitford! The miserable little me to be taken up and loved after tearing myself to pieces! Have you been simply speculating? You have no positive knowledge of it! Why do you kiss me?’

‘Why do you tremble and blush so?’

Clara looked at her as clearly as she could. She bowed her head. ‘It makes my conduct worse!’

She received a tenderer kiss for that. It was her avowal, and it was understood: to know that she had loved, or had been ready to love him, shadowed her in the retrospect.

‘Ah! you read me through and through,’ said Clara, sliding to her for a whole embrace.

‘Then there never was cause for him to fear?’ Lætitia whispered.

Clara slid her head more out of sight. ‘Not that my heart . . . But I said I have seen it; and it is unworthy of him. And if, as I think now, I could have been so rash, so weak, wicked, unpardonable—such thoughts were in me!—then to hear him speak, would make it necessary for me to uncover myself and tell him—incredible to you, yes!—that while . . . yes, Lætitia, all this is true: and thinking of him as the noblest of men, I could have welcomed any help to cut my knot. So there,’ said Clara, issuing from her nest with winking eyelids, ‘you see the pain I mentioned.’

‘Why did you not explain it to me at once?’

‘Dearest, I wanted a century to pass.’

‘And you feel that it has passed?’

‘Yes; in Purgatory—with an angel by me. My report of the place will be favourable. Good angel, I have yet to say something.’

‘Say it, and expiate.’

‘I think I did fancy once or twice, very dimly, and especially to-day . . . properly I ought not to have had any idea: but his coming to me, and his not doing as another would have done, seemed . . . A gentleman of real nobleness does not carry the common light for us to read him by. I wanted his voice; but silence, I think, did tell me more: if a nature like mine could only have had faith without hearing the rattle of a tongue.’

A knock at the door caused the ladies to exchange looks.

Lætitia rose as Vernon entered.

‘I am just going to my father for a few minutes,’ she said.

‘And I have just come from yours,’ Vernon said to Clara.

She observed a very threatening expression in him.

The sprite of contrariety mounted to her brain to indemnify her for her recent self-abasement. Seeing the bed-room door shut on Lætitia, she said : ‘ And of course papa has gone to bed ’ : implying ‘ otherwise . . . ’

‘ Yes, he has gone. He wished me well.’

‘ His formula of good-night would embrace that wish.’

‘ And failing, it will be good night for good to me ! ’

Clara’s breathing gave a little leap. ‘ We leave early to-morrow.’

‘ I know. I have an appointment at Bregenz for June.’

‘ So soon ? With papa ? ’

‘ And from there we break into Tyrol, and round away to the right, Southward.’

‘ To the Italian Alps ! And was it assumed that I should be of this expedition ? ’

‘ Your father speaks dubiously.’

‘ You have spoken of me, then ? ’

‘ I ventured to speak of you. I am not over-bold, as you know.’

Her lovely eyes troubled the lids to hide their softness.

‘ Papa should not think of my presence with him dubiously.’

‘ He leaves it to you to decide.’

‘ Yes, then : many times : all that can be uttered.’

‘ Do you consider what you are saying ? ’

‘ Mr. Whitford, I shut my eyes and say Yes.’

‘ Beware. I give you one warning. If you shut your eyes . . . ’

‘ Of course,’ she flew from him, ‘ big mountains must be satisfied with my admiration at their feet.’

‘ That will do for a beginning.’

‘ They speak encouragingly.’

‘ One of them.’ Vernon’s breast heaved high.

‘To be at your feet makes a mountain of you?’ said she.

‘With the heart of a mouse if that satisfies me!’

‘You tower too high; you are inaccessible.’

‘I give you a second warning. You may be seized and lifted.’

‘Some one would stoop, then.’

‘To plant you like the flag on the conquered peak!’

‘You have indeed been talking to papa, Mr. Whitford.’

Vernon changed his tone.

‘Shall I tell you what he said?’

‘I know his language so well.’

‘He said——’

‘But you have acted on it.’

‘Only partly. He said——’

‘You will teach me nothing.’

‘He said . . .’

‘Vernon, no! oh! not in this house!’

That supplication coupled with his name confessed the end to which her quick vision perceived she was being led, where she would succumb.

She revived the same shrinking in him from a breath of their great word yet: not here; somewhere in the shadow of the mountains.

But he was sure of her. And their hands might join. The two hands thought so, or did not think, behaved like innocents.

The spirit of Dr. Middleton, as Clara felt, had been blown into Vernon, rewarding him for forthright out-speaking. Over their books, Vernon had abruptly shut up a volume and related the tale of the house. ‘Has this man a spice of religion in him?’ the Rev. Doctor asked midway. Vernon made out a fair general case for his cousin in that respect. ‘The complementary dot on his i of a commonly civilized human creature!’ said Dr.

Middleton, looking at his watch and finding it too late to leave the house before morning. The risky communication was to come. Vernon was proceeding with the narrative of Willoughby's generous plan when Dr. Middleton electrified him by calling out : ' He whom of all men living I should desire my daughter to espouse ! ' and Willoughby rose in the Rev. Doctor's esteem : he praised that sensibly minded gentleman, who could acquiesce in the turn of mood of a little maid, albeit Fortune had withheld from him a taste of the switch at school. The father of the little maid's appreciation of her volatility was exhibited in his exhortation to Vernon to be off to her at once with his authority to finish her moods and assure him of peace in the morning. Vernon hesitated. Dr. Middleton remarked upon being not so sure that it was not he who had done the mischief. Thereupon Vernon, to prove his honesty, made his own story bare. ' Go to her,' said Dr. Middleton. Vernon proposed a meeting in Switzerland, to which Dr. Middleton assented, adding : ' Go to her ' : and as he appeared a total stranger to the decorum of the situation, Vernon put his delicacy aside, and taking his heart up, obeyed. He too had pondered on Clara's consent to meet him after she knew of Willoughby's terms, and her grave sweet manner during the ramble over the park. Her father's breath had been blown into him ; so now, with nothing but the faith lying in sensation to convince him of his happy fortune (and how unconvincing that may be until the mind has grasped and stamped it, we experience even then when we acknowledge that we are most blest), he held her hand. And if it was hard for him, for both, but harder for the man, to restrain their particular word from a flight to heaven when the cage stood open and nature beckoned, he was practised in self-mastery, and she loved him the more.

Lætitia was a witness of their union of hands on her coming back to the room.

They promised to visit her very early in the morning, neither of them conceiving that they left her to a night of storm and tears.

She sat meditating on Clara's present appreciation of Sir Willoughby's generosity.

CHAPTER XLIX

LÆTITIA AND SIR WILLOUGHBY

WE cannot be abettors of the tribes of imps whose revelry is in the frailties of our poor human constitution. They have their place and their service, and so long as we continue to be what we are now, they will hang on to us, restlessly plucking at the garments which cover our nakedness, nor ever ceasing to twitch them and strain at them until they have fairly stripped us for one of their horrible Walpurgis nights : when the laughter heard is of a character to render laughter frightful to the ears of men throughout the remainder of their days. But if in these festival hours under the beams of Hecate they are uncontrollable by the Comic Muse, she will not flatter them with her presence during the course of their insane and impious hilarities, whereof a description would out-Brocken Brockens and make Graymalkin and Paddock too intimately our familiars.

It shall suffice to say that from hour to hour of the midnight to the grey-eyed morn, assisted at intervals by the ladies Eleanor and Isabel, and by Mr. Dale awakened and reawakened—hearing the vehemence of his petitioning outcry to soften her obduracy—Sir Willoughby pursued

Lætitia with solicitations to espouse him, until the inveteracy of his wooing wore the aspect of the life-long love he raved of aroused to a state of mania. He appeared, he departed, he returned ; and all the while his imps were about him and upon him, riding him, prompting, driving, inspiring him with outrageous pathos, an eloquence to move any one but the dead, which its object seemed to be in her torpid attention. He heard them, he talked to them, caressed them ; he flung them off and ran from them, and stood vanquished for them to mount him again and swarm on him. There are men thus imp-haunted. Men who, setting their minds upon an object, must have it, breed imps. They are noted for their singularities, as their converse with the invisible and amazing distractions are called. Willoughby became aware of them that night. He said to himself, upon one of his dashes into solitude : I believe I am possessed ! And if he did not actually believe it, but only suspected it, or framed speech to account for the transformation he had undergone into a desperately beseeching creature, having lost acquaintance with his habitual personality, the operations of an impish host had undoubtedly smitten his consciousness.

He had them in his brain : for while burning with an ardour for Lætitia, that incited him to frantic excesses of language and comportment, he was aware of shouts of the names of Lady Busshe and Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, the which, freezing him as they did, were directly the cause of his hurrying to a wilder extravagance and more headlong determination to subdue before break of day the woman he almost dreaded to behold by daylight, though he had now passionately persuaded himself of his love of her. He could not, he felt, stand in the daylight without her. She was his morning. She was, he raved, his predestinated wife. He cried : ‘ Darling ! ’

both to her and to solitude. Every prescription of his ideal of demeanour as an example to his class and country, was abandoned by the enamoured gentleman. He had lost command of his countenance. He stooped so far as to kneel, and not gracefully. Nay, it is in the chronicles of the invisible host around him, that in a fit of supplication, upon a cry of 'Lætitia!' twice repeated, he whimpered.

Let so much suffice. And indeed not without reason do the multitudes of the servants of the Muse in this land of social policy avoid scenes of an inordinate wantonness, which detract from the dignity of our leaders and menace human nature with confusion. Sagacious are they who conduct the individual on broad lines, over familiar tracks, under well-known characteristics. What men will do, and amorously minded men will do, is less the question than what it is politic that they should be shown to do.

The night wore through. Lætitia was bent, but had not yielded. She had been obliged to say—and how many times, she could not bear to recollect: 'I do not love you; I have no love to give'; and issuing from such a night to look again upon the face of day, she scarcely felt that she was alive.

The contest was renewed by her father with the singing of the birds. Mr. Dale then produced the first serious impression she had received. He spoke of their circumstances, of his being taken from her and leaving her to poverty, in weak health; of the injury done to her health by writing for bread; and of the oppressive weight he would be relieved of by her consenting. He no longer implored her; he put the case on common ground.

And he wound up: 'Pray do not be ruthless, my girl.'

The practical statement, and this adjuration in-

congruously to conclude it, harmonized with her disordered understanding, her loss of all sentiment and her desire to be kind. She sighed to herself : ' Happily, it is over ! '

Her father was too weak to rise. He fell asleep. She was bound down to the house for hours ; and she walked through her suite, here at the doors, there at the windows, thinking of Clara's remark ' of a century passing.' She had not wished it, but a light had come on her to show her what she would have supposed a century could not have effected : she saw the impossible of overnight a possible thing : not desirable, yet possible, wearing the features of the possible. Happily, she had resisted too firmly to be again besought.

Those features of the possible once beheld allured the mind to reconsider them. Wealth gives us the power to do good on earth. Wealth enables us to see the world, the beautiful scenes of the earth. Lætitia had long thirsted both for a dowering money-bag at her girdle, and the wings to fly abroad over lands which had begun to seem fabulous in her starved imagination. Then, moreover, if her sentiment for this gentleman was gone, it was only a delusion gone ; accurate sight and knowledge of him would not make a woman the less helpful mate. That was the mate he required : and he could be led. A sentimental attachment would have been serviceless to him. Not so the woman allied by a purely rational bond : and he wanted guiding. Happily, she had told him too much of her feeble health and her lovelessness to be reduced to submit to another attack.

She busied herself in her room, arranging for her departure, so that no minutes might be lost after her father had breakfasted and dressed.

Clara was her earliest visitor, and each asked the other

whether she had slept, and took the answer from the face presented to her. The rings of Lætitia's eyes were very dark. Clara was her mirror, and she said : ' A singular object to be persecuted through a night for her hand ! I know these two damp dead leaves I wear on my cheeks to remind me of midnight vigils. But you have slept well, Clara.'

' I have slept well, and yet I could say I have not slept at all, Lætitia. I was with you, dear, part in dream and part in thought : hoping to find you sensible before I go.'

' Sensible. That is the word for me.'

Lætitia briefly sketched the history of the night ; and Clara said, with a manifest sincerity that testified of her gratitude to Sir Willoughby : ' Could you resist him, so earnest as he is ? '

Lætitia saw the human nature without sourness : and replied : ' I hope, Clara, you will not begin with a large stock of sentiment, for there is nothing like it for making you hard, matter-of-fact, worldly, calculating.'

The next visitor was Vernon, exceedingly anxious for news of Mr. Dale. Lætitia went into her father's room to obtain it for him. Returning she found them both with sad visages, and she ventured, in alarm for them, to ask the cause.

' It's this,' Vernon said : ' Willoughby will everlastingly tease that boy to be loved by him. Perhaps, poor fellow, he had an excuse last night. Anyhow he went into Crossjay's room this morning, woke him up and talked to him, and set the lad crying, and what with one thing and another Crossjay got a berry in his throat, as he calls it, and poured out everything he knew and all he had done. I needn't tell you the consequence. He has ruined himself here for good, so I must take him.'

Vernon glanced at Clara. ' You must indeed,' said

she. 'He is my boy as well as yours. No chance of pardon?'

'It's not likely.'

'Lætitia!'

'What can I do?'

'Oh! what can you not do?'

'I do *not* know.'

'Teach him to forgive!'

Lætitia's brows were heavy and Clara forebore to torment her.

She would not descend to the family breakfast-table. Clara would fain have stayed to drink tea with her in her own room, but a last act of conformity was demanded of the liberated young lady. She promised to run up the moment breakfast was over. Not unnaturally, therefore, Lætitia supposed it to be she to whom she gave admission, half an hour later, with a glad cry of, 'Come in, dear.'

The knock had sounded like Clara's.

Sir Willoughby entered.

He stepped forward. He seized her hands. 'Dear!' he said. 'You cannot withdraw that. You called me dear. I am, I must be dear to you. The word is out, by accident or not, but, by heaven, I have it and I give it up to no one. And love me or not—marry me, and my love will bring it back to you. You have taught me I am not so strong. I must have you by my side. You have powers I did not credit you with.'

'You are mistaken in me, Sir Willoughby,' Lætitia said feebly, outworn as she was.

'A woman who can resist me by declining to be my wife, through a whole night of entreaty, has the quality I need for my house, and I batter at her ears for months, with as little rest as I had last night, before I surrender my chance of her. But I told you last night I want you within the twelve hours. I have staked my pride on it.

By noon you are mine : you are introduced to Mrs. Mountstuart as mine, as the lady of my life and house. And to the world ! I shall not let you go.'

'You will not detain me here, Sir Willoughby ?'

'I will detain you. I will use force and guile. I will spare nothing.'

He raved for a term, as he had done overnight.

On his growing rather breathless, Lætitia said : 'You do not ask me for love ?'

'I do not. I pay you the higher compliment of asking for *you*, love or no love. My love shall be enough. Reward me or not. I am not used to be denied.'

'But do you know what you ask for ? Do you remember what I told you of myself ? I am hard, materialistic ; I have lost faith in romance, the skeleton is present with me all over life. And my health is not good. I crave for money. I should marry to be rich. I should not worship you. I should be a burden, barely a living one, irresponsible and cold. Conceive such a wife, Sir Willoughby !'

'It will be you !'

She tried to recall how this would have sung in her ears long back. Her bosom rose and fell in absolute dejection. Her ammunition of arguments against him had been expended overnight.

'You are so unforgiving,' she said.

'Is it I who am ?'

'You do not know me.'

'But you are the woman of all the world who knows *me*, Lætitia.'

'Can you think it better for you to be known ?'

He was about to say other words : he checked them. 'I believe I do not know myself. Anything you will, only give me your hand ; give it ; trust to me ; you shall direct me. If I have faults, help me to obliterate them.'

‘ Will you not expect me to regard them as the virtues of meaner men ? ’

‘ You will be my wife ! ’

Lætitia broke from him, crying : ‘ Your wife, your critic ! Oh ! I cannot think it possible. Send for the ladies. Let them hear me. ’

‘ They are at hand, ’ said Willoughby, opening the door.

They were in one of the upper rooms anxiously on the watch.

‘ Dear ladies, ’ Lætitia said to them, as they entered. ‘ I am going to wound you, and I grieve to do it : but rather now than later, if I am to be your housemate. He asks me for a hand that cannot carry a heart, because mine is dead. I repeat it. I used to think the heart a woman’s marriage portion for her husband. I see now that she may consent, and he accept her, without one. But it is right that you should know what I am when I consent. I was once a foolish romantic girl ; now I am a sickly woman, all illusions vanished. Privation has made me what an abounding fortune usually makes of others—I am an Egoist. I am not deceiving you. That is my real character. My girl’s view of him has entirely changed ; and I am almost indifferent to the change. I can endeavour to respect him, I cannot venerate. ’

‘ Dear child ! ’ the ladies gently remonstrated.

Willoughby motioned to them.

‘ If we are to live together, and I could very happily live with you, ’ Lætitia continued to address them, ‘ you must not be ignorant of me. And if you, as I imagine, worship him blindly, I do not know how we are to live together. And never shall you quit this house to make way for me. I have a hard detective eye. I see many faults. ’

‘ Have we not all of us faults, dear child ? ’

‘Not such as he has ; though the excuses of a gentleman nurtured in idolatry may be pleaded. But he should know that they are seen, and seen by her he asks to be his wife, that no misunderstanding may exist, and while it is yet time he may consult his feelings. He worships himself.’

‘Willoughby ?’

‘He is vindictive.’

‘Our Willoughby ?’

‘That is not your opinion, ladies. It is firmly mine. Time has taught it me. So, if you and I are at such variance, how can we live together ? It is an impossibility.’

They looked at Willoughby. He nodded imperiously.

‘We have never affirmed that our dear nephew is devoid of faults. If he is offended . . . And supposing he claims to be foremost, is it not his rightful claim, made good by much generosity ? Reflect, dear Lætitia. We are your friends too.’

She could not chastise the kind ladies any further.

‘You have always been my good friends.’

‘And you have no other charge against him ?’

Lætitia was milder in saying ; ‘He is unpardoning.’

‘Name one instance, Lætitia.’

‘He has turned Crossjay out of his house, interdicting the poor boy ever to enter it again.’

‘Crossjay,’ said Willoughby, ‘was guilty of a piece of infamous treachery.’

‘Which is the cause of your persecuting me to become your wife !’

There was a cry of ‘Persecuting !’

‘No young fellow behaving so basely can come to good,’ said Willoughby, stained about the face with flecks of redness at the lashings he received.

‘Honestly,’ she retorted. ‘He told of himself : and he must have anticipated the punishment he would meet.’

He should have been studying with a master for his profession. He has been kept here in comparative idleness to be alternately petted and discarded: no one but Vernon Whitford, a poor gentleman doomed to struggle for a livelihood by literature—I know something of that struggle—too much for me!—no one but Mr. Whitford for his friend.’

‘Crossjay is forgiven,’ said Willoughby.

‘You promise me that?’

‘He shall be packed off to a crammer at once.’

‘But my home must be Crossjay’s home.’

‘You are mistress of my house, Lætitia.’

She hesitated. Her eyelashes grew moist. ‘You can be generous.’

‘He is, dear child!’ the ladies cried. ‘He is. Forget his errors in his generosity, as we do.’

‘There is that wretched man Fitch.’

‘That sot has gone about the county for years to get me a bad character,’ said Willoughby.

‘It would have been generous in you to have offered him another chance. He has children.’

‘Nine. And I am responsible for them?’

‘I speak of being generous.’

‘Dictate.’ Willoughby spread out his arms.

‘Surely now you should be satisfied, Lætitia?’ said the ladies.

‘Is *he*?’

Willoughby perceived Mrs. Mountstuart’s carriage coming down the avenue.

‘To the full.’ He presented his hand.

She raised hers with the fingers catching back before she ceased to speak and dropped it;—

‘Ladies, you are witnesses that there is no concealment, there has been no reserve, on my part. May heaven grant me kinder eyes than I have now. I would

not have you change your opinion of him ; only that you should see how I read him. For the rest, I vow to do my duty by him. Whatever is of worth in me is at his service. I am very tired. I feel I must yield or break. This is his wish, and I submit.'

'And I salute my wife,' said Willoughby, making her hand his own, and warming to his possession as he performed the act.

Mrs. Mountstuart's indecent hurry to be at the Hall before the departure of Dr. Middleton and his daughter, afflicted him with visions of the physical contrast which would be sharply perceptible to her this morning of his Lætitia beside Clara.

But he had the lady with brains ! He had : and he was to learn the nature of that possession in the woman who is our wife.

CHAPTER I

UPON WHICH THE CURTAIN FALLS

'PLAIN sense upon the marriage question is my demand upon man and woman, for the stopping of many a tragedy.'

These were Dr. Middleton's words in reply to Willoughby's brief explanation.

He did not say that he had shown it parentally while the tragedy was threatening, or at least there was danger of a precipitate descent from the levels of comedy. The parents of hymenæal men and women he was indisposed to consider as *dramatis personæ*. Nor did he mention certain sympathetic regrets he entertained in contemplation of the health of Mr. Dale, for whom, poor gentleman, the proffer of a bottle of the Patterne Port would be

an egregious mockery. He paced about, anxious for his departure, and seeming better pleased with the society of Colonel De Craye than with that of any of the others. Colonel De Craye assiduously courted him, was anecdotal, deferential, charmingly vivacious, the very man the Rev. Doctor liked for company when plunged in the bustle of the preliminaries to a journey.

‘You would be a cheerful travelling comrade, sir,’ he remarked, and spoke of his doom to lead his daughter over the Alps and Alpine lakes for the Summer months.

Strange to tell, the Alps for the Summer months, was a settled project of the colonel’s.

And thence Dr. Middleton was to be hauled along to the habitable quarters of North Italy in high Summer-tide.

That also had been traced for a route on the map of Colonel De Craye.

‘We are started in June, I am informed,’ said Dr. Middleton.

June, by miracle, was the month the colonel had fixed upon.

‘I trust we shall meet, sir,’ said he.

‘I would gladly reckon it in my catalogue of pleasures,’ the Rev. Doctor responded : ‘for in good sooth it is conjectureable that I shall be left very much alone.’

‘Paris, Strasburg, Basle ?’ the colonel inquired.

‘The Lake of Constance, I am told,’ said Dr. Middleton.

Colonel De Craye spied eagerly for an opportunity of exchanging a pair of syllables with the third and fairest party of this glorious expedition to come.

Willoughby met him, and rewarded the colonel’s frankness in stating that he was on the look-out for Miss Middleton to take his leave of her, by furnishing him the occasion. He conducted his friend Horace to the Blue Room, where Clara and Lætitia were seated circling a half embrace with a brook of chatter, and contrived an excuse for leading

Lætitia forth. Some minutes later Mrs. Mountstuart called aloud for the colonel, to drive him away. Willoughby, whose good offices were unabated by the services he performed to each in rotation, ushered her into the Blue Room, hearing her say, as she stood at the entrance : ' Is the man coming to spend a day with me with a face like that ? '

She was met and detained by Clara.

De Craye came out.

' What are you thinking of ? ' said Willoughby.

' I was thinking,' said the colonel, ' of developing a heart, like you, and taking to think of others.'

' At last ! '

' Ah, you're a true friend, Willoughby, a true friend. And a cousin to boot ! '

' What ! has Clara been communicative ? '

' The itinerary of a voyage Miss Middleton is going to make.'

' Do you join them ? '

' Why, it would be delightful, Willoughby, but it happens I've got a lot of powder I want to let off, and so I've an idea of shouldering my gun along the sea-coast and shooting gulls: which'll be a harmless form of committing parricide and matricide and fratricide—for there's my family, and I come of it!—the gull ! And I've to talk lively to Mrs. Mountstuart for something like a matter of twelve hours, calculating that she goes to bed at midnight: and I wouldn't bet on it; such is the energy of ladies of that age ! '

Willoughby scorned the man who could not conceal a blow, even though he joked over his discomfiture.

' Gull ! ' he muttered.

' A bird that's easy to be had, and better for stuffing than for eating,' said De Craye. ' You'll miss your cousin.'

‘I have,’ replied Willoughby, ‘one fully equal to supplying his place.’

There was confusion in the hall for a time, and an assembly of the household to witness the departure of Dr. Middleton and his daughter. Vernon had been driven off by Dr. Corney, who further recommended rest for Mr. Dale, and promised to keep an eye for Crossjay along the road.

‘I think you will find him at the station, and if you do, command him to come straight back here,’ Lætitia said to Clara.

The answer was an affectionate squeeze, and Clara’s hand was extended to Willoughby, who bowed over it with perfect courtesy, bidding her adieu.

So the knot was cut. And the next carriage to Dr. Middleton’s was Mrs. Mountstuart’s, conveying the great lady and Colonel De Craye.

‘I beg you not to wear that face with me,’ she said to him. ‘I have had to dissemble, which I hate, and I have quite enough to endure, and I must be amused, or I shall run away from you and enlist that little countryman of yours, and him I can count on to be professionally restorative. Who can fathom the heart of a girl! Here is Lady Busshe right once more! And I was wrong. She must be a gambler by nature. I never should have risked such a guess as that. Colonel De Craye, you lengthen your face preternaturally, you distort it purposely.’

‘Ma’am,’ returned De Craye, ‘the boast of our army is never to know when we are beaten, and that tells of a great-hearted soldiery. But there’s a field where the Briton must own his defeat, whether smiling or crying, and I’m not so sure that a short howl doesn’t do him honour.’

‘She was, I am certain, in love with Vernon Whitford all along, Colonel De Craye!’

‘ Ah ! ’ the colonel drank it in. ‘ I have learnt that it was not the gentleman in whom I am chiefly interested. So it was not so hard for the lady to vow to friend Willoughby she would marry no one else ! ’

‘ Girls are unfathomable ! And Lady Busshe—I know she did not go by character—shot one of her random guesses, and she triumphs. We shall never hear the last of it. And I had all the opportunities. I ’m bound to confess I had.’

‘ Did you by chance, ma’am,’ De Craye said with a twinkle, ‘ drop a hint to Willoughby of her turn for Vernon Whitford ? ’

‘ No,’ said Mrs. Mountstuart, ‘ I ’m not a mischief-maker ; and the policy of the county is to keep him in love with himself, or Patterne will be likely to be as dull as it was without a lady enthroned. When his pride is at ease he is a prince. I can read men. Now, Colonel De Craye, pray, be lively.’

‘ I should have been livelier, I ’m afraid, if you had dropped a bit of a hint to Willoughby. But you ’re the magnanimous person, ma’am, and revenge for a stroke in the game of love shows us unworthy to win.’

Mrs. Mountstuart menaced him with her parasol. ‘ I forbid sentiments, Colonel De Craye. They are always followed by sighs.’

‘ Grant me five minutes of inward retirement, and I ’ll come out formed for your commands, ma’am,’ said he.

Before the termination of that space De Craye was enchanting Mrs. Mountstuart, and she in consequence was restored to her natural wit.

So, and much so universally, the world of his dread and his unconscious worship wagged over Sir Willoughby Patterne and his change of brides, until the preparations for the festivities of the marriage flushed him in his county’s eyes to something of the splendid glow he had

worn on the great day of his majority. That was upon the season when two lovers met between the Swiss and Tyrol Alps over the Lake of Constance. Sitting beside them the Comic Muse is grave and sisterly. But taking a glance at the others of her late company of actors, she compresses her lips.

THE END

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